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PRESENTS

100% UNOFFICIAL

THE STORY OF FINAL FANTASY

Discover the legend of gaming's greatest JRPG

INSIDE ALL THE SPIN-OFFS, YOUR FAVOURITE CHARACTERS & MORE!

☞ Every game in the main series covered ☞ In-depth features ☞ Behind-the-scenes access

Digital Edition

FUTURE

FIRST EDITION

WELCOME

Starting life as a niche, Japan-only release borne out of desperation by a struggling Hironobu Sakaguchi in 1987, *Final Fantasy* is now one of the biggest and most well-loved videogame series ever made. Spanning almost 40 years, the franchise that initially set the standard for Japanese RPGs has continued to rewrite the rules of the genre across 16 main series games and countless spin-offs, gaining legions of loyal fans around the world in the process.

In this celebration of all things *Final Fantasy*, we go back to the very beginning of the adventure with the help of some of the franchise's key players. You'll discover the story of the series' genesis, its evolution and how it's reinvented itself time and again in the pursuit of greatness.

We bring you a host of fascinating features and in-depth interviews on all of the numbered games in the series – from the masterful *FFVII* to the divisive *FFXIII* – as well as taking a look back at some of the highs, lows and downright weird spin-offs, remakes and rebirths we've seen over the years. We also run down some of the series' most iconic characters and bosses, look at how *Final Fantasy* has expanded into various different mediums – from movies to manga – and celebrate the franchise's incredible music as we sit down with gaming's most celebrated and successful composer, Nobuo Uematsu.

Enjoy!

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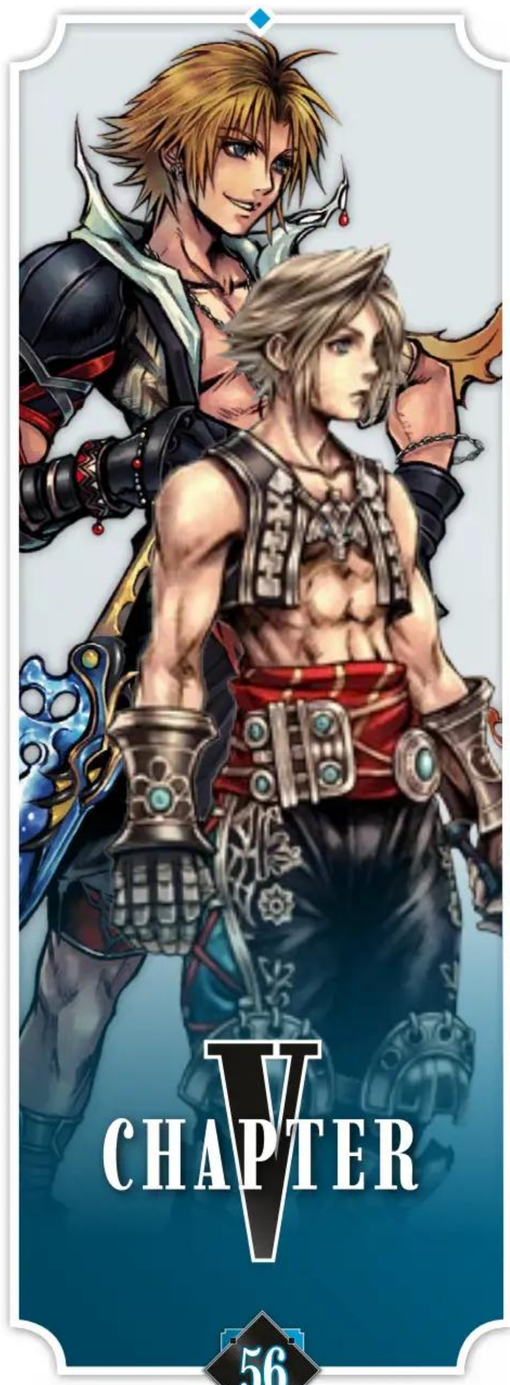

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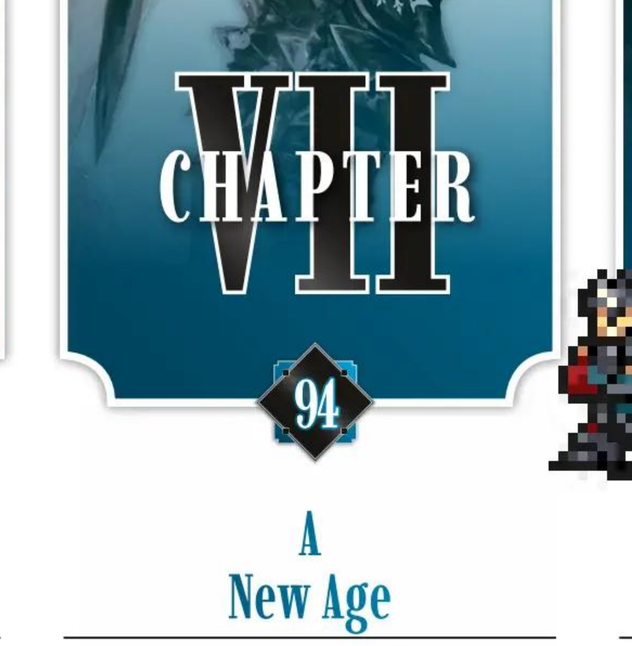

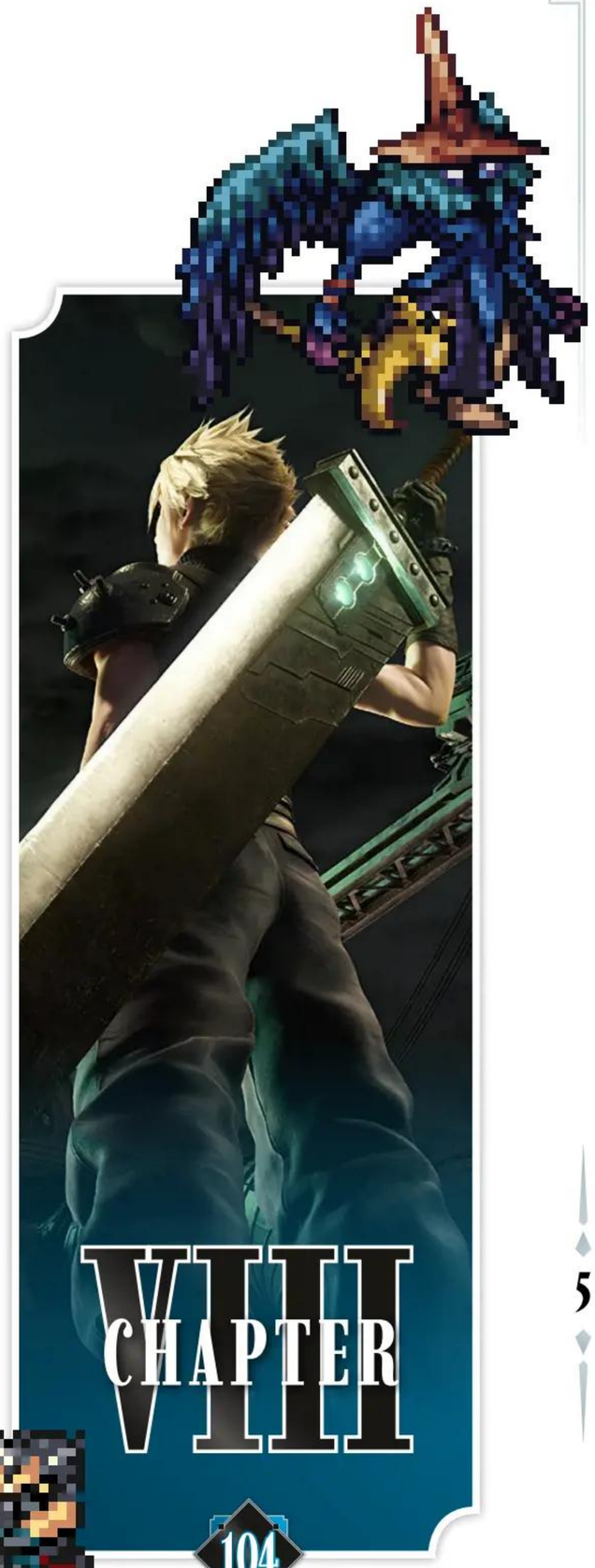

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NEVER–

The untold legend of the world's greatest RPG

ENDING Story

On the last day of development of a new *Final Fantasy* game, Hironobu Sakaguchi, a man who looks like he would maintain his kindly half-smile even while asking you to clean out your desk and never come back, would gather the entire team into the office. Together, in a weary but exhilarated silence, everyone would sit and watch the ending to the game on which they had worked for the past weeks, months and, in the case of later entries to the series, years. Tears would fall. Champagne would flow. It was finally finished.

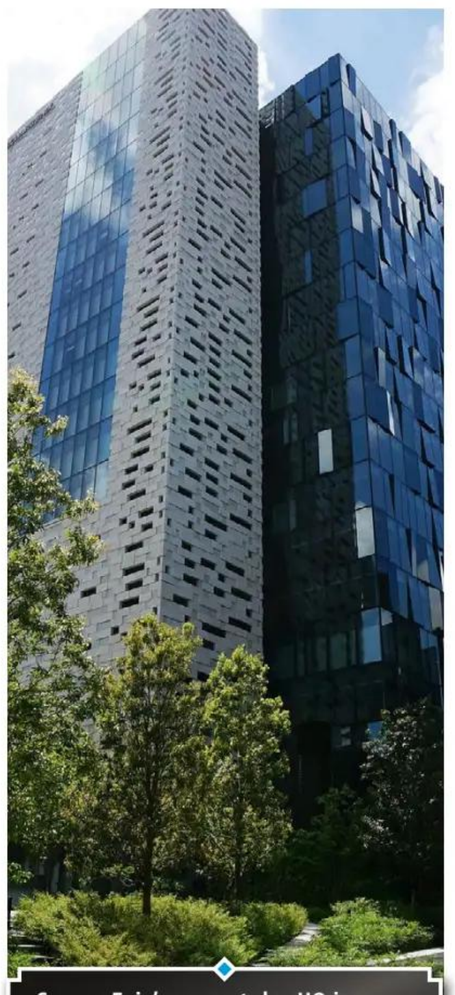
Except, of course, *Final Fantasy*'s title has always been a winking misnomer. The morning after the night before, the team would blearily gather again, this time each member holding a blank sheet of paper headed with the question: where now? The other titanic series of the videogame industry return, with each new entry and expansion, to Hyrule, to Azeroth, to San Andreas and all the rest. In *Final Fantasy*, however, every world is born anew, a grand and continuous act of creation and reinvention that has, over the course of more than three decades, come to represent a constellation of realities, each distinct apart from a few common props.

The business of multiverse creation began in a beauty salon on the outskirts of Tokyo in the mid-1980s. Sakaguchi, a student at the time, only applied for a job at Square, a tiny, chaotic start-up, because he believed that he had neither the skills nor the experience to work at more established game studios. With a ragtag band of other young people, he learned how to make games in front of the old hairdryers and panoramic mirrors. Numerous times the venture almost failed, not least because of the hubris of Square's founder Masafumi Miyamoto, a twentysomething part-time employee at Keio University who almost sent the company spiralling into bankruptcy.

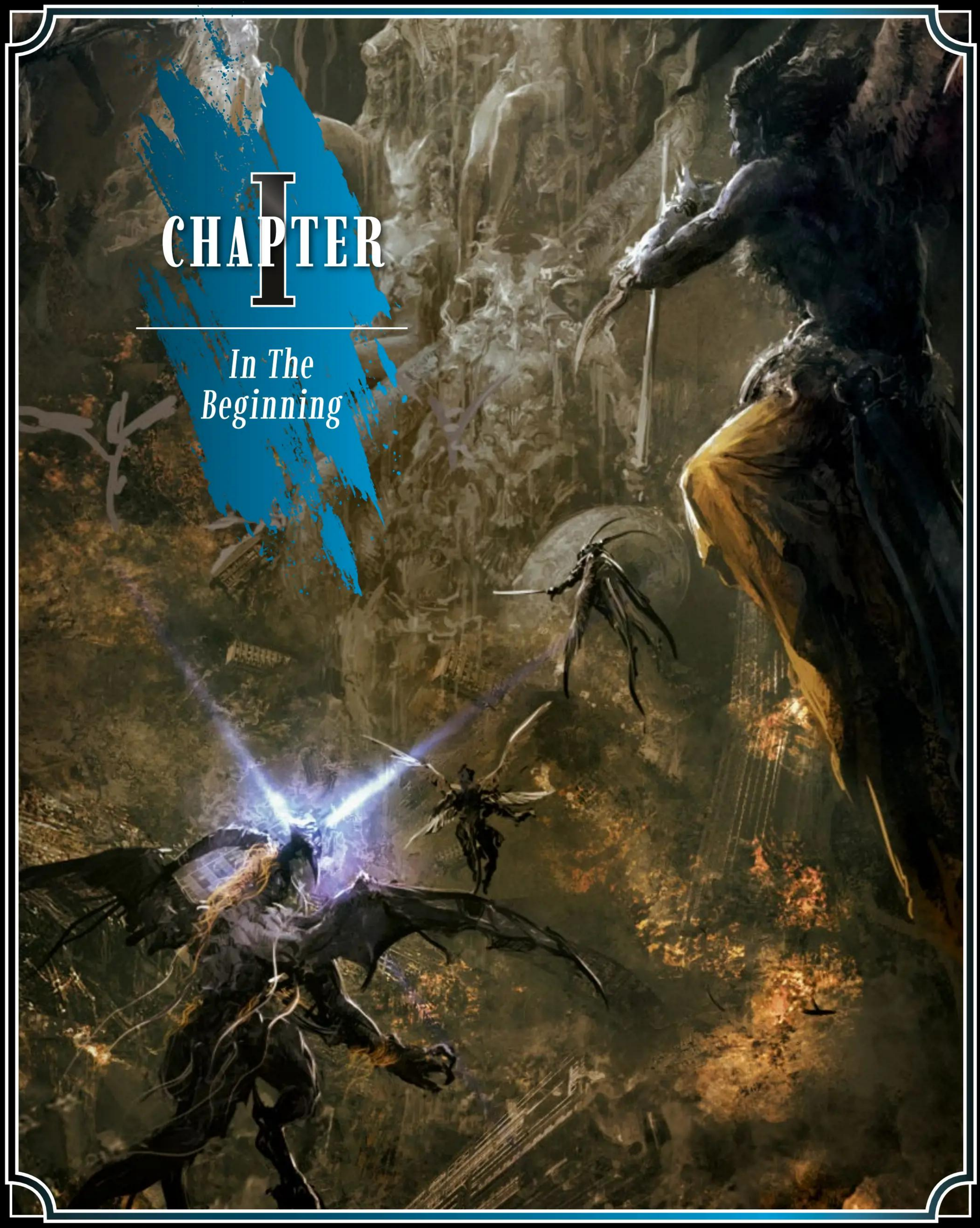
The story of these early years and all that followed has never been fully told, not least because many of the key players have parted in dramatic fashion along the way. Sakaguchi, *Final Fantasy*'s visionary creator, left Square under a dark cloud following the commercial failure of *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within*, a CGI film that lost an estimated $90 million at the box office. Following his departure, staff were allegedly instructed by Square's CEO not to talk to Sakaguchi, in an attempt to excise his influence.

In recent years, the ice has somewhat thawed even as the storied series has, in the 14th, 15th and 16th games, begun to rediscover the wild magic of its former days. A reconciliation of sorts allows the story to be told by those who were there, in their own words, finally. ☞

"In Final Fantasy, every world is born anew, a grand and continuous act of creation and reinvention"



Square Enix's present-day HQ in Shinjuku, Tokyo. Things weren't quite so grand 30 years ago, of course; the founders set up shop in a vacant hairdresser's studio



CHAPTER I

In The Beginning

Hironobu Sakaguchi

I grew up in a place called Ibaraki, a rural region north of Tokyo.

There was a cliff face close to my family home. While I was in primary school, I'd go there and chip away at the rock in search of precious stones and fossils. One day, an elderly man holding a briefcase walked up to me. He said that he'd seen me there, working away each day. He explained that he was a geologist. The man opened a briefcase, which was filled with immaculate fossils and precious stones and asked if I would like to swap one of my rough specimens with a polished one. Then, every week for about two years, I swapped my excavations with the man, till I had enough polished stones to fill a display case in my bedroom.

Our house was filled with books. My mother, who was a bookworm, owned a twenty-volume work about bugs and butterflies, written by a British etymologist. I had taken piano lessons since the age of five and, when I arrived at high school, I founded a band called Bichou, or 'beautiful butterfly'. I thought I would grow up to be a professional musician and started putting on lots of concerts at school. I booked a large venue for my band to play and didn't want to lose money on it, so I printed off tickets and started selling them at a local girls' school. When my teachers found out, I was nearly expelled.

When I arrived at university the Apple 2 had just come out and I wanted one. They were incredibly expensive. I was a student and couldn't afford that kind of outlay, of course, so I went to Akihabara, Tokyo's electronics district, where they sold cheap knock-offs. Even those machines were pretty expensive but still I managed to buy one. Once I had the machine I wanted to buy software, so I needed a part-time job. That's when I saw the role advertised for Square. It seemed like a good fit, because I was studying programming at university and figured I could pick up some experience on the job. I still dreamed of becoming a musician.

Square had just started when I joined. They were renting an old hairdresser's place. We had to take the mirrors off the walls. We didn't have enough computers for everyone, so we had to take turns. Our founder, Masafumi Miyamoto, worked in the science and technology department at Keio University, which was next door to the hairdresser's. His plan was to rope in technically minded university students to work at the company – but he never actually ended up hiring any students from that college.

I took the job because my computer skills were still quite basic. I felt that, if I'd have tried to go to one of the more established companies like Konami or Namco, who were already very well known, I would have been given just menial tasks. My interview was with the vice-president Hisashi Suzuki. He was in a similar place to me in life: very young and only part-time. It was all quite casual. Suzuki was like, "Yeah, yeah, come along and join us."

Through the cherry blossom sits Keio University, attended by Sakaguchi and other early members of Square staff

Hironobu Sakaguchi (front, centre), Nobuo Uematsu (front, left) and other members of the *Cruise Chaser Blassty* team in March 1986. Pixel artist Kazuko Shibuya (back, centre) defined *Final Fantasy*'s in-game character style across the first six games.

> "There were no seniors in the company. We were totally free"
>
> **Hironobu Sakaguchi**

For my first job I was assigned as one of the programming team for a game based on the TV gameshow *Torin-ingen*, which is a birdman contest where people create costumes and see how far they can fly while jumping off a pier into the sea. Then, suddenly, the team was disbanded and the project cancelled. I later found out it was because Miyamoto hadn't secured the licence, and the TV show had found out what we were doing and shut us down. That's the kind of company we were back then – chaotic. Soon after that we moved to a more professional three-room office in Yokohama. It was a good place to be because we were all students there and it was like having a place to hang out. That's when we started work on our first game: *The Death Trap*. Others followed, but we certainly didn't have any big hits at that time. It was pretty tough, to be honest.

When the *Torin-ingen* team was wiped out I was moved on to my next project and became a director. I wasn't really promoted; I was just always a director from then on. I was 22 years old when I became a full-time employee. We didn't go home often during those years. We'd start work at midday and carry on through till the evening, then we'd go out drinking. The laws were different then so the arcades could be open all night. We'd spent most of the night playing, then in the morning we'd either go home to catch a few hours sleep or go straight back to the office. It was all new. My generation was the first to make videogames. There were no seniors in the company; we could make our own decisions. We were totally free. The sense of liberty was incredible.

About that time we desperately needed to hire artists to draw for these games, so we hired three people from a local art university. One of those was a friend of Nobuo Uematsu. One day she told me about this young composer friend of hers. It turned out that he worked in a local record store I used to visit.

Hironobu Sakaguchi

As a child Sakaguchi, who grew up in the rural district of Ibaraki, north of Tokyo, had planned to become a professional musician. He played in a host of different bands, showing an early entrepreneurial spirit by staging concerts in local halls, for which he sold tickets. His dreams changed, however, when he first saw the Apple 2 computer. At university, Sakaguchi saved up and bought a bootleg version of the machine, on which he designed and programmed a couple of basic RPGs for his own amusement. Before long his hobby became a profession when he joined Square, then a tiny firm staffed almost exclusively by university students. The job proved a massive distraction from his studies, which took eight years – time during which the first *Final Fantasy* was made.

Nobuo Uematsu

After I finished university, I wanted to become a professional composer but there were no jobs around. I lived in an apartment with a lot of artists, novelists and composers in a similar position to me. We'd sit around and talk and drink at night, but none of us really had any job prospects at the time. One of these friends, Miki Yukinoura, was a graphic designer at this small game company called Square. She had worked on Square's very first game, *The Death Trap*, and came to me and asked whether I would like to contribute some music to a new game they were making. It was called *Cruise Chaser Blassty*, and they needed some extra tracks written, as they planned to release the game with a vinyl record. I wrote the music at home, using a four-track recorder and a bunch of different synthesisers.

At the time I was working part-time in a record rental shop close to where I was living in Hiyoshi, Yokohama. The shop was just around the corner from Square's offices at the time. So, even before I was asked to do this work, I already knew Hironobu from when he'd come into the store and rent Kate Bush records.

Now, at that time, I had a lot of strange, slightly odd people in my personal life — people with what you might almost describe as occult powers. One of these guys came to me and said: "Mr Uematsu: your life is about to turn around. You're going to be a big success." The very next week I was walking in Yokohama and, by chance, Hironobu was on the other side of the street. We crossed to chat. He asked me what I was up to and then told me that there were plans to make Square into a proper company, and would I like to come along and join. That was my interview, right there in the street.

Sakaguchi About that time Miyamoto came to me and said, "We are going to be a more serious company now." That made it easier for me to invite new people on board. When I ran into Nobuo in the street I told him we were going to be a more professional place. In an effort to become a more serious company, Miyamoto decided to rent a new studio in the Ginza, Tokyo's high-class district.

Uematsu That was part of his pitch to me: Square was going to move to the Ginza or one of the other terrifically expensive areas in central Tokyo. I figured that the company must be doing incredibly well. That definitely influenced my decision to accept the offer. We actually did move to that luxurious office, about two or three months later. It was a proper office building. But the rent there was ridiculously high: around £10,000 per month. After a couple of months we just couldn't pay, and moved out.

Nasir Gebelli was a celebrated programmer of action games in the Apple 2 scene when he accepted a role at Square in Japan. It paid off. Gebelli reportedly retired in 1994 on royalties

Sakaguchi The rent at this new, smaller office in Okachimachi was about a tenth of that in the Ginza.

Uematsu That extended the company's life expectancy, but Square still didn't have a hit game. Among those of us on the shop floor there was a feeling that the company was going to shut down soon. But we were all young. It was no big deal. We just figured we'd go and do something else instead.

> "There was a feeling that the company was going to shut down"
>
> Nobuo Uematsu

Sakaguchi Now, we'd had one good stroke of fortune. A year after I joined the company full-time we hired Nasir Gebelli, a programmer from Iran who had moved to America after the Iranian cultural revolution. He was a legend in the Apple 2 programming world and one of my gods. How did we manage to convince such a famous programmer to move to Japan to work for a tiny software company? Well, Miyamoto was visiting the US and he met Gebelli at a party. Gebelli explained that he had just split up with his wife and needed a job. He had absolutely no money at all — just a Ferrari that he'd been left in the divorce settlement! Miyamoto told me the news and, in the same breath, explained that I was going to be Gebelli's minder in Japan. I protested: "I can't even speak English!"

When Gebelli arrived, he told me that he would only eat steak. Every day I'd have to take him out to a steak restaurant. I was 23 years old.

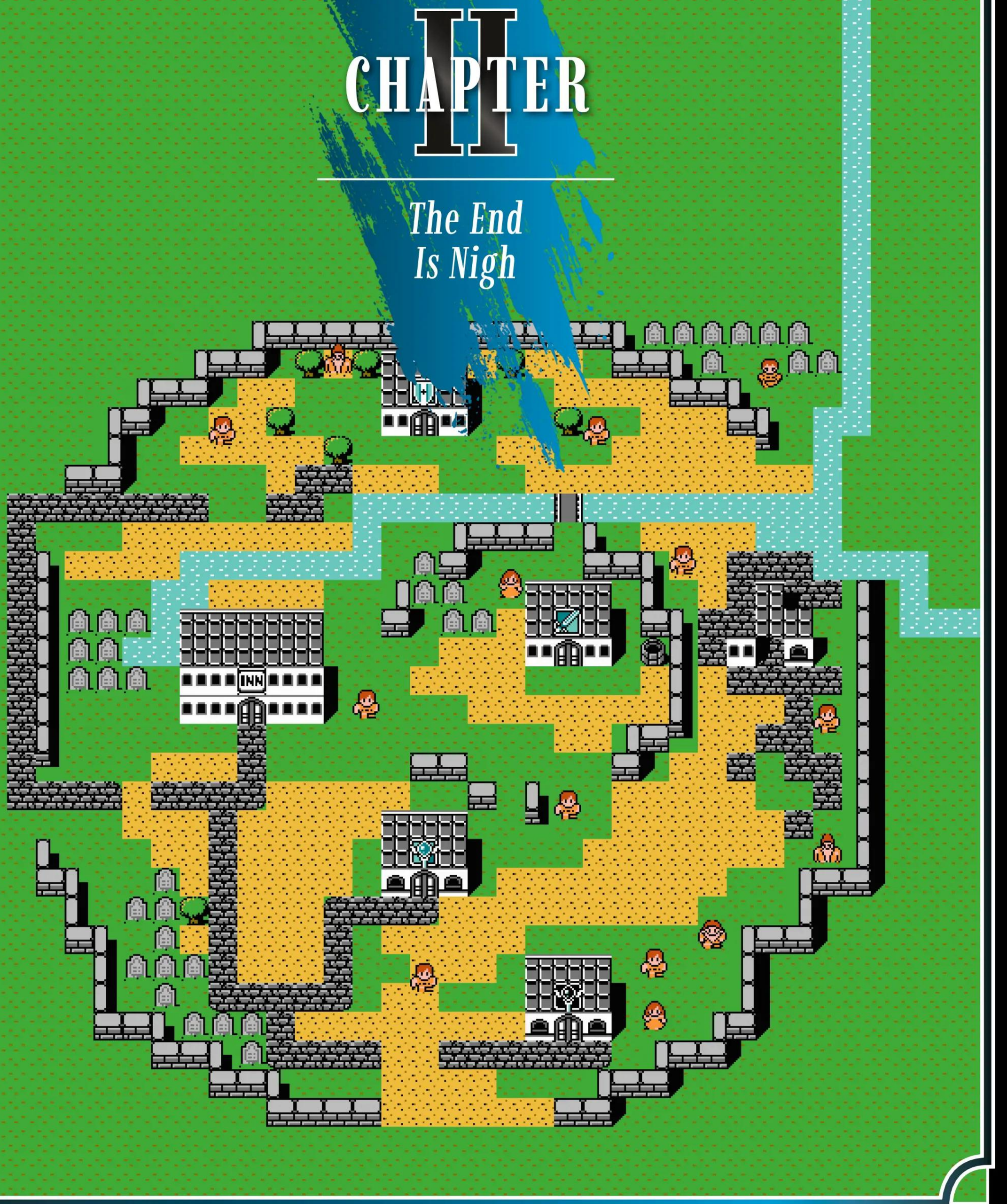
Cruise Chaser Blassty, one of Square's earliest games and the first to which Uematsu contributed, launched alongside a red vinyl-record soundtrack, the first example of the savvy merchandising for which Square would become known

Nobuo Uematsu

Nobuo Uematsu was born in Kochi, on the island of Shikoku, Japan. A promising gymnast, as a child Uematsu wanted to become a professional wrestler. Uematsu's sister played piano. He taught himself some basic chords but never had any formal lessons. At university, Uematsu formed a band called Random House, but soon realised he wasn't a natural performer, so decided to focus on composition instead. The lead singer of Random House was picked up by a record company. Uematsu was asked to compose an advertising jingle for the Marui Department Store, which she then sang. This early success proved to be an anomaly. At 25, Uematsu was still working in a record store on the outskirts of Tokyo.

CHAPTER II

The End Is Nigh



Sakaguchi After moving to the Ginza the company was in real financial trouble. We had been trying to make games for the Famicom Disc System, but we didn't have the skills to compete with the larger companies. To help us out of this mire, Miyamoto gathered the four game directors together and told us to each come up with a proposal for a game. The rest of the employees, he told us, would then vote on which of the four games the company should make, based on which one they thought had the best chance at commercial success. I had wanted to make an RPG for years after playing *Ultima* and *Wizardry* on the Apple 2. But Square was focused on making Famicom games and, without a save function on the cartridge, I could see no way to make these games work. Then Enix's *Dragon Quest* came along. It used an ingenious code-based system that allowed players to save their game progress. It was primitive and simplistic, sure, but it worked.

So I pitched *Final Fantasy* as my game to the company. I told the staff that, if they picked my game, we'd sell more copies than *Dragon Quest*. They just laughed. When the time came for the staff to pick which game they wanted to make, only three people out of the entire company voted for *Final Fantasy*. One of those was Gebelli, who didn't really have a choice in the matter thanks to all those steak dinners. He actually didn't know what an RPG was; he had only ever programmed action games. I explained it all to him and he said, "What's so interesting about that?" I said, "Just do as you're told and it'll make sense in the end." I still remember that argument.

One of the other directors pitched a movie tie-in for the *Aliens* film. That sounds like it will sell, right? The rest of the staff agreed. Even so, Miyamoto told me that I was allowed to make *Final Fantasy*, on the proviso I could do it with just four staff on my team. Thankfully, they were all very talented people: Koichi Ishii, Akitoshi Kawazu, Uematsu and Gebelli. We made the game in ten months.

When it comes to classical fantasy, people of my generation were influenced by novels like the *Elric* series by Michael Moorcock and *Guin Saga* by Kaoru Kurimoto. These were the famous fantasy stories at the time. And the front covers for all these books were all drawn by one Japanese artist: Yoshitaka Amano.

> "When the time came to pick which game to make, only three people voted for Final Fantasy"
>
> **Hironobu Sakaguchi**

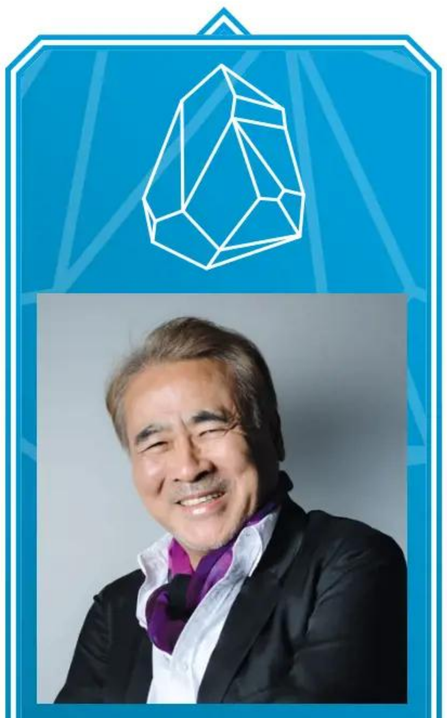
Yoshitaka Amano

Mr Sakaguchi had just started on *Final Fantasy*, and was looking for an artist to draw some of the concept art for that. He wanted someone who could draw science-fiction style art, and then he thought, 'Okay, well in Japan, who's the big guy who can draw science-fiction?'

Sakaguchi I felt we needed a very strong core visual for *Final Fantasy*, especially if we were to compete with *Dragon Quest*, which had Akira Toriyama, who was very famous. Amano wasn't on the same level as Toriyama at the time. Sure, he had a cult popularity among people like me, but he wasn't a mainstream star. Perhaps that gave me the confidence to phone him up.

Amano I was in Yokohama when the call came through. At that time, videogames weren't big at all. *Dragon Quest* was already out, but I wasn't really sure what games were all about. When people in the publishing world heard what I was doing, I met some strong opposition. "Why would you want to go and do something like that?" they'd ask. But we were all still young at the time. Sakaguchi was still in his 20s; I was in my 30s. I saw an opportunity to create something new, with emerging talent.

Sakaguchi I didn't give Amano much direction. I told him an outline of the plot – the fact there were crystals, the four elements and so on. I remember mentioning there was a bit of the



Yoshitaka Amano

Amano grew up in Shizuoka in central Japan. When he was 14 years old a friend invited Amano to visit him in Tokyo. Amano went, but instead of seeing his friend, visited the animation company Tatsunoko Productions instead. Amano showed Yoshida Tatsuo, the head of the company, his portfolio and he was offered a job on the spot. Amano left school and, between 15 and 30, worked at the studio as a character designer and animator. After Tatsuo died, Amano struck out on his own, and began to take on commissions for books and magazines, which is how he came to the attention of Hironobu Sakaguchi.

Yoshitaka Amano claims that he was paid ten times as much as he'd ever received for a commission before to illustrate the front cover of the first *Final Fantasy*

☞ story in the first half of the game where there would be a stone giant blocking the path, but not much more than that...

Amano After I received that original brief, I illustrated about six or seven pieces, including the poster that was used for the cover. The game was only about halfway complete, so I had to go off my imagination. In fact, there was a big misunderstanding because initially Sakaguchi showed me pixel art of one of the characters drawn on a piece of squared paper. I thought: "Oh, that's what he's looking for!" and went away and drew my own version on squared paper. He politely told me: "No, that's not what we're looking for." I remember that I was paid a huge amount for my work. The figure was one zero larger than what I was used to receiving for this kind of contract.

Sakaguchi Oh. I didn't know that! Wow. We were conned (laughs). No, he drew us so many pieces... it was worth it.

Amano I've never signed a retainer contract with Square Enix. From the beginning until now I've been freelance.

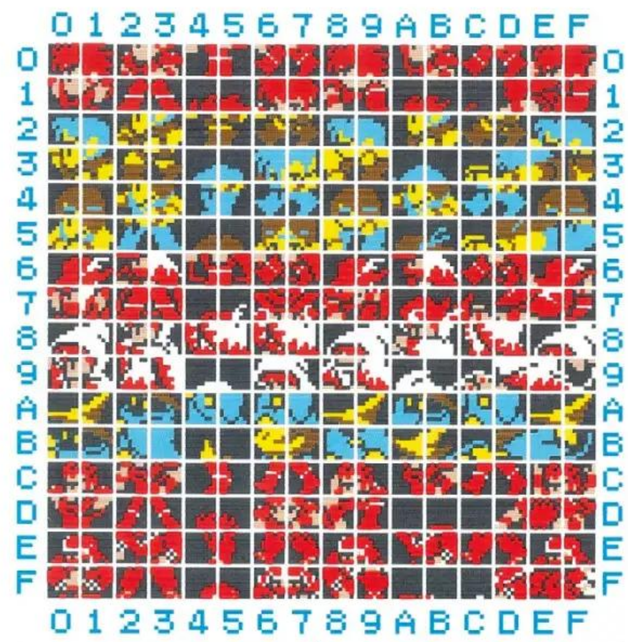
Sakaguchi Around that time I met with the head editor of *Jump* comics, Kazuhiko Torishima. He is a legendary editor, who has worked with and mentored many of Japan's best-loved comic-book writers. I showed him my plans for *Final Fantasy*, and he told me that we should give the characters more of a history and background. That's what we did from the fourth game onwards, but for the early games Dungeons & Dragons was our point of reference. D&D allows players to come up with their own backstories. So I decided to make the protagonists nameless, with no fixed roles or clear backstory. That's why we decided to make them orphans. Orphans fit the criteria. Early into development I drew up a list of all the pieces of music we'd need for the game: the battle theme, the romantic theme, the dungeon music and so on. Somehow I forgot to write 'title music' on my list. But it's one of the most important parts of the game. You can't have a title screen without music! At the 11th hour I had to rush into Uematsu's office to ask him to compose something for the title screen.

Uematsu I remember it vividly. The game was being finished and Sakaguchi comes into my room and says: "I just need one more song for the game." I said, "OK, when do you need it?" He said: "Now. I need it right now." He had such a serious expression on his face I couldn't refuse him. He didn't give me any direction. Because I had so little time, I just used arpeggiated chords and a delay. There was no melody, and in my mind I imagined it being played on a harp. When I played it to Sakaguchi I don't think he even reacted. It just went straight into the game. I had no idea this prelude would become so synonymous with the series.

Sakaguchi There was so little memory then. For the game ending, I decided we'd use a starfield, like travelling through space, so we could keep memory to a minimum. Each star was one pixel large. I actually showed the programmimg team the screensaver from the Macintosh, and told them to copy that. It ended up being one of the most effective scenes in the game.

We completed development in about ten months. I remember going into a local toy shop on launch day – there were no videogame stores at that time. I saw a glass case at the back of the shop and inside there were sitting five games, one of which was *Final Fantasy*. It was hugely affecting. The sales guys believed we would sell about 200,000 units. I told them that if we were only going to sell that many we should just give up. I wanted to push for 600,000. In the end they came to a compromise and we manufactured about 400,000 copies in the end.

> "I told them that if we were only going to sell 200,000 units we should just give up"
>
> **Hironobu Sakaguchi**



Kazuko Shibuya was, for the first decade of *Final Fantasy*'s history, tasked with translating Yoshitaka Amano's elegiac concept art into workable game sprites

The four heroes were presented in silhouette on *Final Fantasy*'s title screen in order to save on precious memory. It was just one of many examples of where tight constraints led to ingenious and defining solutions

Story continues on Pg20

FINAL FANTASY I II III

THE SERIES BEGINS

The trio of titles that kicked off one of the biggest and most beloved videogame franchises

It's the mid-1980s, and 25-year-old Japanese videogame designer Hironobu Sakaguchi is pondering quitting the industry to go back to college. As a last roll of the dice for him, and maybe even his company, Square, Sakaguchi has an idea for a game. Its name was *Final Fantasy*, and it would birth a series that would go on to become a videogaming juggernaut.

Sakaguchi was inspired by the role-playing games that emerged in Japan in the mid-1980s, such as *Dragon Quest*, which was an early pioneer of a simple experience and levelling system. He and his team tweaked these mechanics and proposed a new role-playing title for Square. As for the new game's name, *Fighting Fantasy* was mooted, but this was abandoned after it was discovered it was also the name of a series of gamebooks. Sakaguchi was adamant that the game needed a name that could be shortened to boost its popularity, so the same letters were kept, and *Final Fantasy* was chosen. This could easily be abbreviated to 'FF' for easy recognition from videogame fans. The release of *Final Fantasy* in 1987 was a risk in the early generations of videogame consoles, but one that would pay off... and then some.

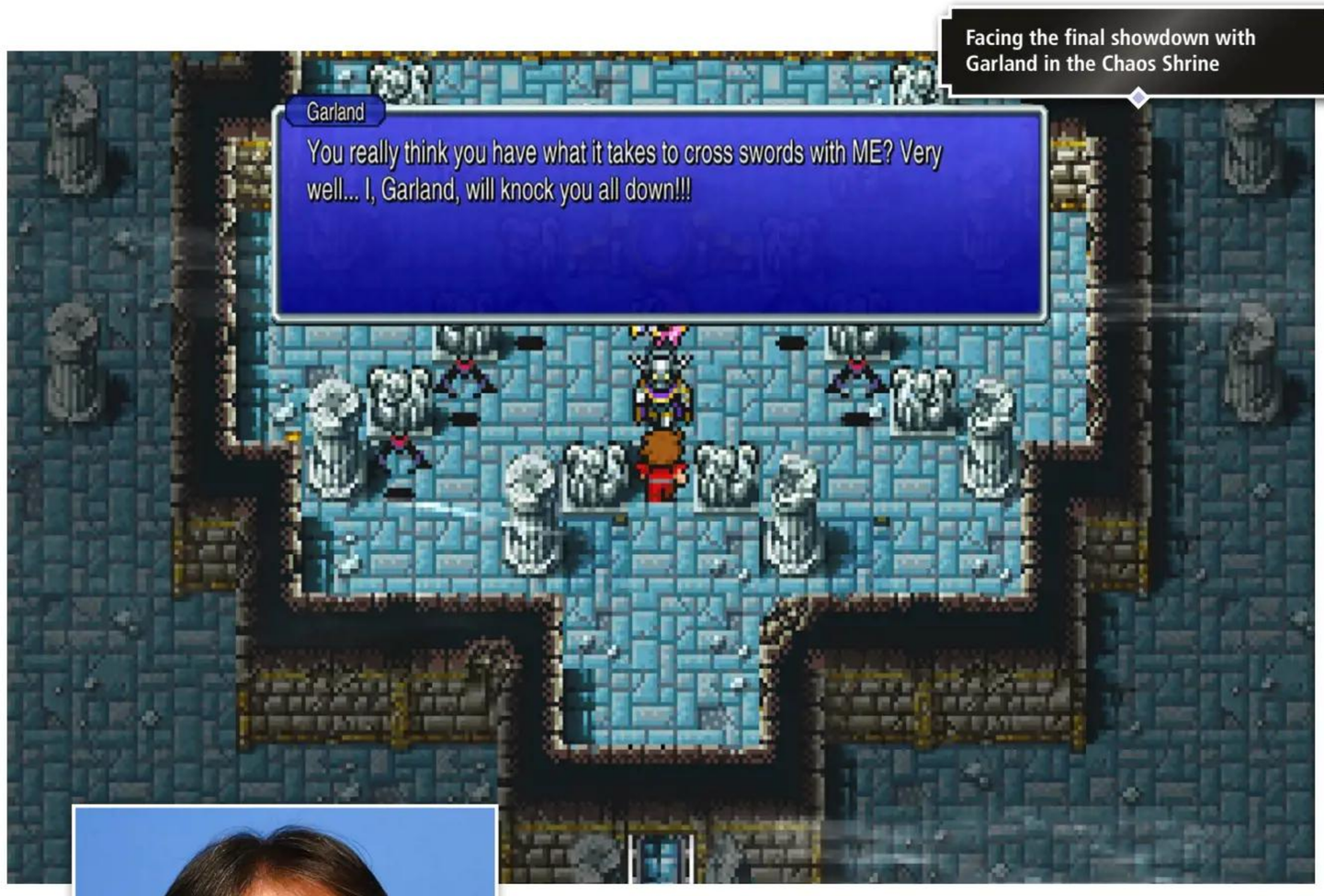
The inaugural game in the series has a more basic story than what would follow. The player controls four Warriors of Light who have to restore crystals to bring balance back to the world. All this while saving Princess Sarah, who has been kidnapped by the evil knight, Garland, and battling four elemental fiends who appear in each shrine that the heroes must traverse. The gameplay began the early series tradition of turn-based battles. The system was simple but effective: gain experience points through winning encounters to level your characters up, in turn boosting their offensive and defensive stats. Unlike later games, ability points had not yet been introduced, and instead magic spells were purchased in shops and towns.

At the start of the game, players were given the option to customise their initial party of four into an initial six different classes. These included Fighters, who excelled in physical damage, the fast-footed Thief, Black Mages who could cast damaging magic and White Mages who healed characters who were low on hit points. Returning players could tweak their parties as much as they wished, some going for pure physicality, some solely magic, while others preferred more of a balance.

The world of *Final Fantasy* is split between three main areas. Dungeons, towns and a world map. Dungeons are where difficult enemies are encountered and often act as a means of progression, with rewards and boss battles at the

Winning *Final Fantasy I*'s turn-based battles gave the four Warriors of Light an experience boost

Castle Cornelia, the home of damsel in distress Princess Sarah



Facing the final showdown with Garland in the Chaos Shrine

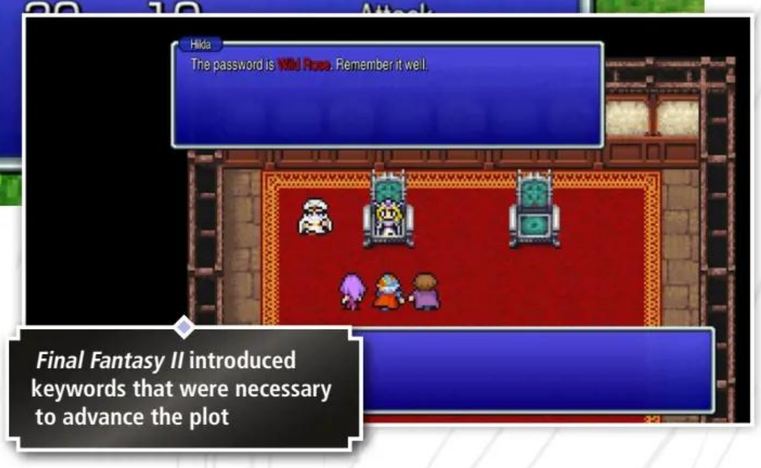
end. Towns, meanwhile, are where you meet non-playable characters and expand the story, as well as being a safe haven for resting at inns to restore your HP. They're also an ideal time to stock up on new weapons and spells before travelling to the next dungeon. Notable locations include Pravoka, Elfheim and Melmond. In between the towns and dungeons is a world map that you travel on foot. To protect you from harder enemies and to cordon off later story points, natural barriers like mountains and oceans prevent the player from progressing to certain areas. Later, the player acquires a canoe, a ship and finally an airship to travel the entire world – a mechanic that would become a series staple.

Final Fantasy also included what would become a series mainstay – a Nobuo Uematsu soundtrack. The legendary composer is responsible for the soundtracks for the first nine games, and his iconic stamp is notable on the opening game. Tracks such as Prelude, Mt. Gulg and Victory in particular would feature motifs that would appear again in later Uematsu soundtracks.

Getty

Hironobu Sakaguchi is the creator of *Final Fantasy*, and would remain on board as a writer until *Final Fantasy IX* and as an executive producer until *Final Fantasy XII*

The heroes of *Final Fantasy II* facing off against four Black Knights



Final Fantasy II introduced keywords that were necessary to advance the plot

The Final Fantasy III remake

Final Fantasy III was given a new lease of life in 2006

Like its predecessor, *Final Fantasy III* was only initially released in Japan. However, in 2006, 18 years after the original, the game was remade for the handheld Nintendo DS. The new title was a remake with minor story changes and updates. The graphics were enhanced and the gameplay was tweaked with a reworked job system. The four main characters were also given names this time around: Luneth, Arc, Refia and Ingus.

After its success in 2000's *Final Fantasy IX*, this game had its own version of Mognet where, instead of sending mail to Moogles in-game, players could have dialogue with non-player characters to expand the lore of the game and to undertake hidden sidequests. The remake also had a very 'noughties' feature of using the DS's Wi-Fi connection to email other players, something that is no longer fully available after the closure of the DS's Wi-Fi Connection service. The game's difficulty was still there for seasoned gamers, though, with players still unable to save in dungeons.

Strong sales and positive reviews meant it was made available on other handheld devices in 2011, including iOS and Android as well as the PSP, and eventually on Steam for Windows in 2014.

It was released on the NES in Japan in 1987 and in North America in 1990. The game received positive reviews that praised the story and gameplay, and it often appears in 'best of' lists for the NES. In Japan, it sold more than half a million copies, plus another 1.3 million in North America. This has been boosted since with the sales of subsequent graphical remasters on PlayStation, mobile devices and PC, with sales now topping 2 million. The NES's successor, the Super Nintendo Entertainment System, was still a few years away, so the next game in the series would also make its way onto the NES the following year.

Coming hot on the heels of its predecessor, *Final Fantasy II* had an all-new story. Square decided that the series would be an anthology with no sequels – instead, each game would be connected by returning themes and elements. It features a stronger and deeper plot with empires and rebellions, battles on Dreadnought airships and even being swallowed by a giant Leviathan. Our heroes are Firion, Maria and Guy, whose parents are killed when the Empire of Palamecia invades the town of Fynn. The trio are saved by, and subsequently join, the Wild Rose Rebellion along with Leon, Maria's brother, who starts off as a party member before disappearing and is replaced by a revolving roster of guest characters. The characters are illustrated by Yoshitaka Amano's detailed concept art, including Firion and his red blade, Maria and her bow, Leon's dark armour and Guy's powerful frame.

The story came on leaps and bounds, but what of the gameplay? *Final Fantasy II*'s progression system turned the first game on its head. Instead of characters levelling up though earning experience points by winning battles, stats such as strength, magic and spirit increased. This encouraged the player to use different types of weapons and strategies in battles, but meant certain stats could end up lagging behind, making the fight against the Palamecian Empire that much more tricky. In theory, this approach encouraged the player to experiment by switching up physical and magical attacks to boost the corresponding stats and make the character stronger. However, in practice, players could simply attack their own party members and level up faster that way – gaining attack and defence boosts at the same time.

Garuda, a powerful bird-like enemy, made his first appearance in *Final Fantasy III*

The game itself is altogether bigger and more ambitious than the first entry in the series. Altair – home of the Wild Rose Rebellion – and Fynn, which quickly falls under the shadow of the empire, are more developed than the simple towns from *Final Fantasy*, as are the long, tough dungeons like Mysidian Tower and Pandaemonium.

MP, the value required to cast magic spells, was first introduced in this game, as were the series' unofficial mascots: cute, giant, yellow chicken-like birds called Chocobos. The reoccurring character Cid also makes his first appearance, as do what would become popular enemy types – Bombs, Behemoths and Marlboros. Uematsu's soundtrack is once again on song, and expanded to contain more tracks. Even the Chocobos get their own ditty.

Final Fantasy II was initially only released in Japan before arriving on the PlayStation for European and North American audiences in 2003, and worldwide on the Game Boy Advance in 2004. On its initial run, the game sold 800,000 copies in Japan, which was more than its predecessor, but the lack of an international release meant it sold fewer copies in total. Again, reviews were positive, but reactions to the gameplay system were mixed. *Final Fantasy II* had proved that Square could pen a compelling and poignant narrative, but would gamers stick with its flawed gameplay?

Final Fantasy III arrived at the turn of the 1990s to positive reviews and was the final release on the NES, with the console reaching the end of its lifespan. Out of the box came Square's most ambitious story so far, but with a heavy dose of nostalgia. Once again, your characters were nameless as the Warriors of Light returned. The world has fallen into darkness and a quartet of orphans are tasked with saving the world from the evil wizard, Xande.

Gameplay saw the triumphant return of *Final Fantasy I*'s job system after the lukewarm response to the second entry's mechanics. This improved version encouraged players to experiment with different classes of fighter, from Warriors and Knights to Summoners and Mages. It was satisfying finding the best party that worked for you, making it feel unique to the player.

The game's scope is ambitious, with a number of locations across different maps. Saronia in particular is an extensive city, with four different sections containing a variety of shops, plus a library, a Chocobo researcher's house and a castle. *Final Fantasy III* was the first entry to include summons – large, powerful monsters who aid the party in battle. These beings included some now-mainstays of the series: the thunder god Ramuh, the fire beast Ifrit and the king of the dragons Bahamut.

The game also introduced Moogles to the franchise. These cute, pink-winged furry creatures would go on to rival Chocobos as the series' mascot. New battle commands like Jump, Steal and Throw were made available for the first time, fleshing out combat options. The menu screens were also now the classic blue colour.

Like the previous edition, *Final Fantasy III* was initially not released outside Japan. It sold well to its home audience, with 1.4 million copies flying off the shelves for the NES to positive reviews. Since their release, all three games have been ported onto various newer home and handheld consoles through remasters and are widely available. These come with quality-of-life upgrades such as improved graphics and sounds and certain gameplay tweaks like faster battles that make for a more modern and streamlined experience. Sakaguchi had created a series that was on its way to world domination.

> "Sakaguchi was inspired by role-playing games that emerged in Japan in the mid-1980s"

Crystals were a common plot point in the early games

The trio's quirkiest features

Memorable moments from the first games

Attacking thin air

When faced with multiple foes, a good tactic is to focus on one target and take them down one by one. However, in the first two games, if one character defeated an enemy and the next fighter was already queued up to strike, they would swish thin air where enemies once stood.

Watch out for Warmech

Pretty much the series' first superboss, Warmech pounced on the player in the Flying Fortress. Meeting Warmech was rare, but if you did face off with it, you were in for one hell of a battle. Packing a punch, only the game's final boss rivals it for sheer power.

Be my guest(s)

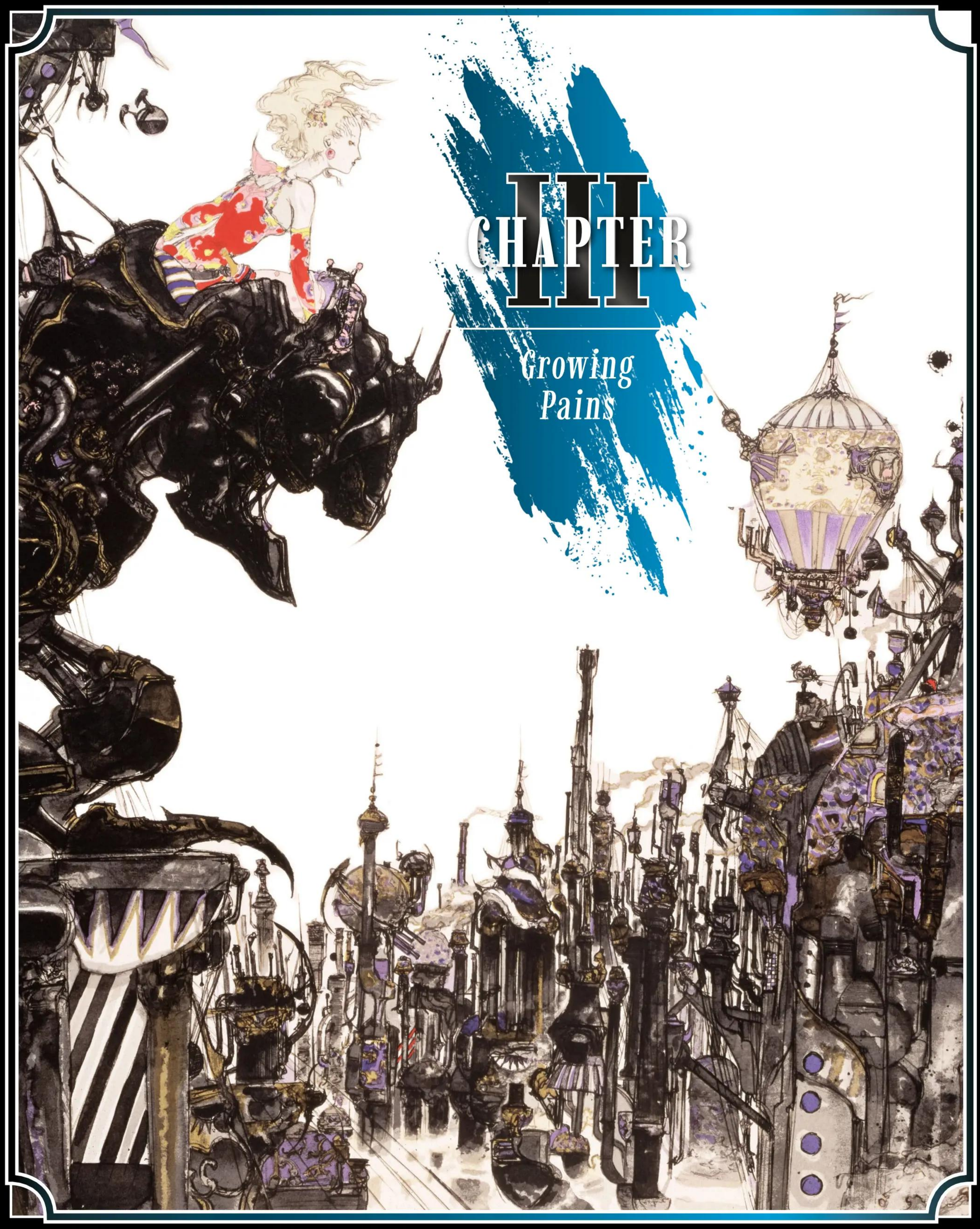
After Leon, *FFII*'s fourth party member becomes a revolving door of guests. Minwu the White Mage, Josef the Monk, the Dragoon Ricard, Leila the pirate and the spear-wielding Gordon. Each member joins for a specific quest, adding a layer of unpredictability to the gameplay.

The ultimate magic

FFII introduced a franchise mainstay: Ultima. One of the most powerful spells in each entry, characters' stats needed to be high, as this vastly increased the spell's power. Ultima would become more epic down the line, its casting animations unleashing more and more mayhem.

Mini me

Mini is a classic spell, used to shrink enemies. In *Final Fantasy III* you're forced to cast it on yourself to enter Tozus, the town of the gnomes, while fleeing from the dragon Bahamut. The section is tricky as you're shrunk while navigating through a dungeon. Stay in the back row!


CHAPTER III
Growing Pains

Uematsu At that time Square really didn't feel like a proper company at all. It was more like a student project. People would finish school in the day then roll up in the evening to work. I think Sakaguchi realised he couldn't do the job while studying. When *Final Fantasy* came out he was still at university, and I was engaged to be married and needed a stable job. I think we realised this could no longer be a student hobby for us all. We had to start making moves to become more professional.

Sakaguchi I'm not sure when I realised that the company had been saved. I never saw the financial numbers, so I wasn't sure where we stood. But a year after *Final Fantasy*'s release we got the second game out. After then I was sure we were safe.

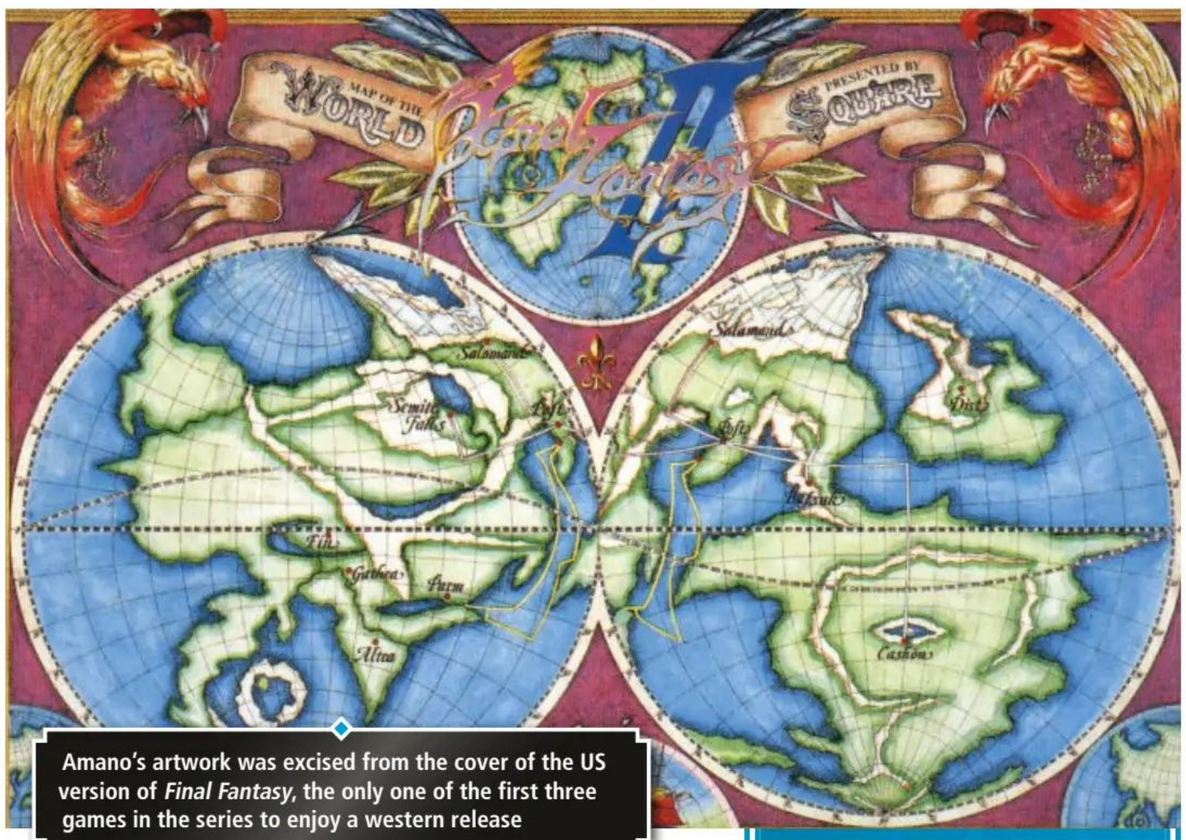
Yoshinori Kitase

I'd spent all day playing videogames while I was supposed to be applying for jobs in the industry. I got stuck on a game, so I went to a local bookshop and picked out a game magazine to find out what I needed to do. On the final page was a recruitment advert for Square. It wasn't very specific. I think it was only four lines long: "We are Square, and we are looking for people to help us make games."

A lot of game devs send in a sample of their work, or an idea for a game they want to make. I didn't have any of that, so I sent in a short film. It was a music video that I'd made at college using animated dancing robot pigs, inspired by Michael Jackson's 'Thriller' video. That was enough to get me through the door. I heard later from Sakaguchi that the CEO of Square didn't like the video and didn't want to hire me. Sakaguchi thought it was interesting, though, and fought to get me in. When I joined in 1990, Sakaguchi's *Final Fantasy* team was already quite large. I was assigned to make *Final Fantasy Legend* for the Game Boy. The differences between our team and the main team were stark. Other than the two directors, we were all complete newbies. We had very old-fashioned black-and-white Macs, while the 50-person main team was on colour machines.

Sakaguchi was already a star back then. There were rumours that he was going to become vice president. Because we were novices, our game became very delayed. I remember Sakaguchi scolding our team one day, which gave us the motivation to work harder.

Uematsu Prior to the Super Famicom I was so limited in the kinds of sounds I could create. I couldn't for example, make a flute sound. Then, when Nintendo announced the Super Famicom, suddenly we could have proper sampling in our games. To be honest, this technical development was instrumental in holding my interest in making game music. If things had continued the way it had been on the early games, I probably would have become very bored and gone on to try something else.



Amano's artwork was excised from the cover of the US version of *Final Fantasy*, the only one of the first three games in the series to enjoy a western release

Sakaguchi When the Super Famicom launched it was a hugely exciting time. The hardware had improved hugely. We had Mode 7, a simulated 3D technique, and you could try all kinds of things there. The number of colours vastly increased, and the sound palette too. We set out to use it well and figure out what we could do with this new technical capacity.

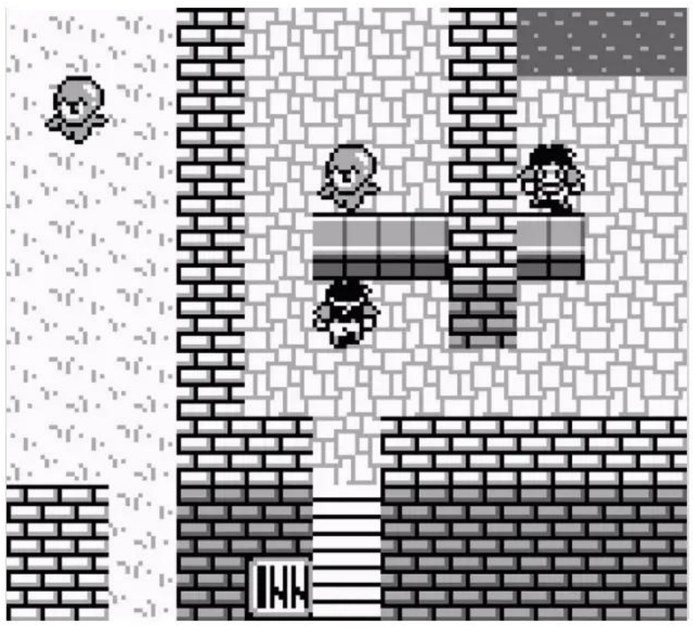
Uematsu Even though you had that limited sampling ability with the Super Famicom, it was still very inconvenient to produce a full-scale piece on these systems. There were so many limitations that you had to think carefully about how you could creatively draw out the best from the system, to make different kinds of pieces and effects. It was a challenge but, that said, human beings thrive under strict limitations in a lot of ways.

> "I heard later that the CEO of Square didn't want to hire me"
>
> Yoshinori Kitase

Sakaguchi Those limitations extended to the kinds of story and setting we could feature in our early games. With the Famicom games, we had to create a story within very limited environments using assets that could be reused easily. That framework forces you to consider carefully how you can surprise players ☞

Final Fantasy's job system, which delineates the roles of the characters that make up the party according to strength, magical ability and so on, has become a defining system within the series, at its best when a player is allowed to define those roles according to their preferred play style

When Kitase joined Square he was considered too inexperienced for *FF* and instead worked with other novices on *Final Fantasy Legend*, a game that, confusingly, is part of the *Seiken Densetsu* series



Yoshinori Kitase

Kitase studied 2D cel animation in the film studies department at Japan University after watching *Star Wars* and being inspired by the stop-frame animation work. After graduation, he joined a small animation company and created stop-frame animations for TV commercials and children's TV shows. After a while, Kitase saw that it would take him many years before he was in a position at the company to be able to direct his own projects, and so decided to switch careers. He saw an advertisement for a job at Square while browsing a game tips magazine in a shop.

☞ and hold their interest. How can you create dramatic and interesting twists that won't require processing power or memory that we just can't spare?

That changed with *Final Fantasy IV* and the Super Famicom. Around that time, a very popular magazine, Shonen Jump, would feature a videogame each week in their pages. I became obsessed with getting a *Final Fantasy* game into that slot, especially because *Dragon Quest* had monopolised the space. I went as far as meeting with the editor, Kazuhiko Torishima, to ask him what we could do to be featured. He began to teach me about how to create deep characters and backstories, and what kind of supporting characters you'd need to help bring the protagonist forward in the drama.

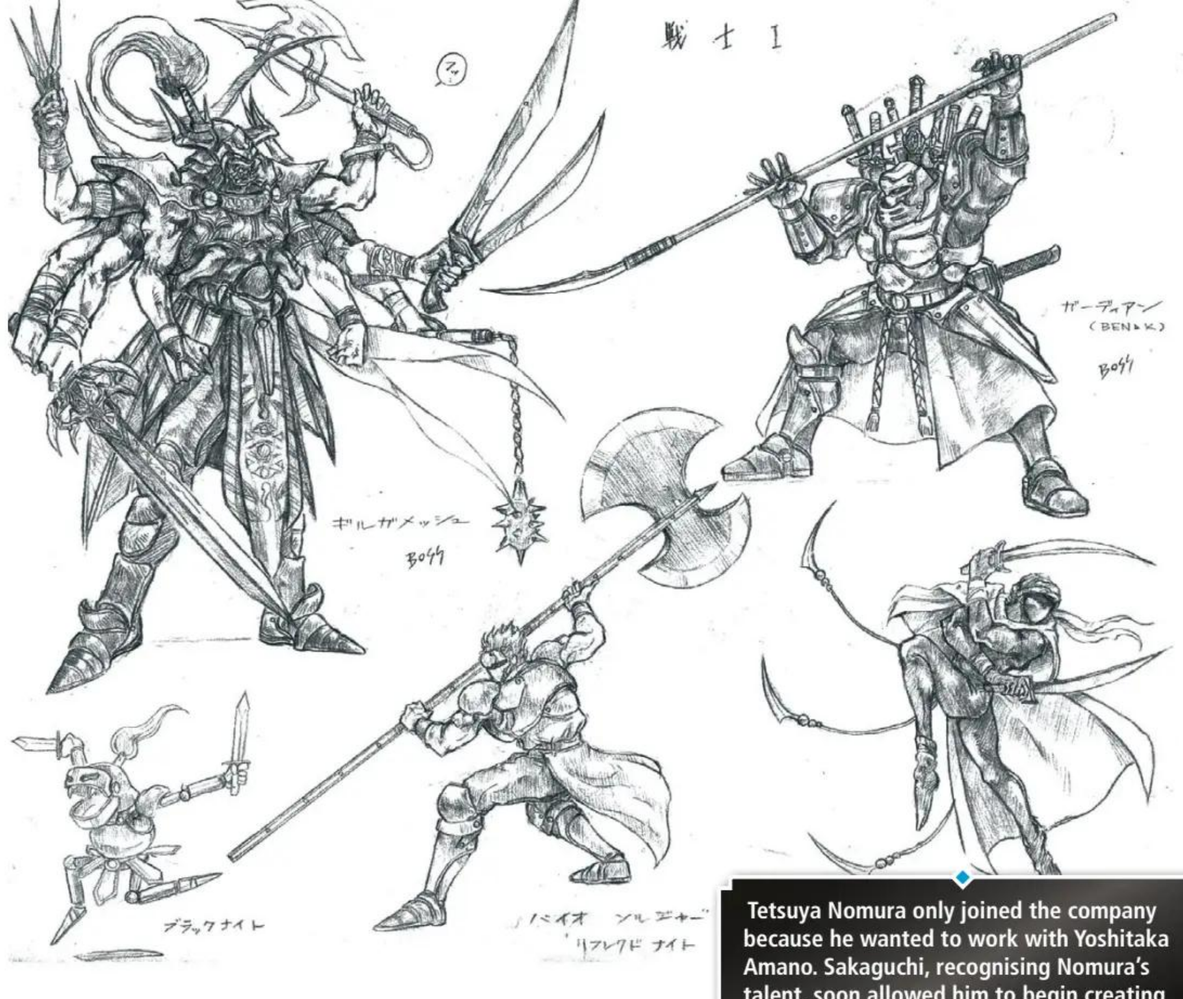
The way it would work is that I'd show him my scripts and he'd point out all of the things that he disliked. I'd go away and rewrite the script and, eventually, he'd maybe point outside something that he thought was good. It was tough because I was essentially learning through criticism. Torishima has been instrumental in growing and mentoring some of Japan's best-known manga talents, so it was invaluable training. He basically taught me how to write stories.

Tetsuya Nomura

I joined Square as a tester for *Final Fantasy IV*. The first time I'd heard about the series was when I was working at a toy shop part-time while in high school. The middle-school kids who visited the shop were excited about this game called *Final Fantasy* and they showed it to me on the shop's TV. I was originally planning on going into advertising design, but while I was at college I saw a recruitment ad from Square in a magazine. The advertisement had an illustration by Yoshitaka Amano next to it. I remembered my high-school art teacher suggesting that I go down the same route as Amano, so I decided to apply. I remember being told by my grandmother that you never get to do exactly what you want from the beginning in any job, so I thought that in the meantime, a job where I simply got to put Amano's art into videogames would be good.

Amano Each time work began on a new *Final Fantasy* I would receive a briefing about the characters involved: their names, their ages, and what kind of role they performed in the game. This all came as text, so it would be left up to me to imagine what the character or monster would look like.

Take Bahamut, for example. Now, Bahamut is a traditional monster from Greek legend. If you look at what a Bahamut is supposed to look like, it's this ugly, pig-like creature. I looked at that and thought, 'The name's great but the creature looks really odd, so perhaps I could draw a dragon instead.' Now, in Japan, whenever anyone hears the name Bahamut they think of it as a dragon, not the ugly pig-like thing from Greek myth. Likewise, I created Odin, one of the other summon monsters, from my imagination. Years later I was commissioned to draw the traditional Odin for a book of Norse mythology. When I went to look up what he was supposed to look like, all that came up were my own illustrations for *Final Fantasy* games.



Tetsuya Nomura only joined the company because he wanted to work with Yoshitaka Amano. Sakaguchi, recognising Nomura's talent, soon allowed him to begin creating character concept art of his own

Nomura The first time I met Sakaguchi was at my job interview. I was surprised that I was being interviewed by such an important person, as I recognised Sakaguchi from magazines. Once Square hired me I sent him a sketchbook filled with my monster and character designs. I remember him looking at some of the female characters I had drawn and saying: "Are these the kinds of girls that you like, then?" Those were his first words to me.

> "After I joined I didn't actually have my own desk for a while"
>
> **Tetsuya Nomura**

After I joined I was so junior that I didn't actually have my own desk for a while. There were four of us who had joined the company together, and we had to share one desk and one PC between us. The time that I joined the team was quite late in development, so I didn't really find any obvious bugs in *Final Fantasy IV*. You could pretty much play the game normally at that point.

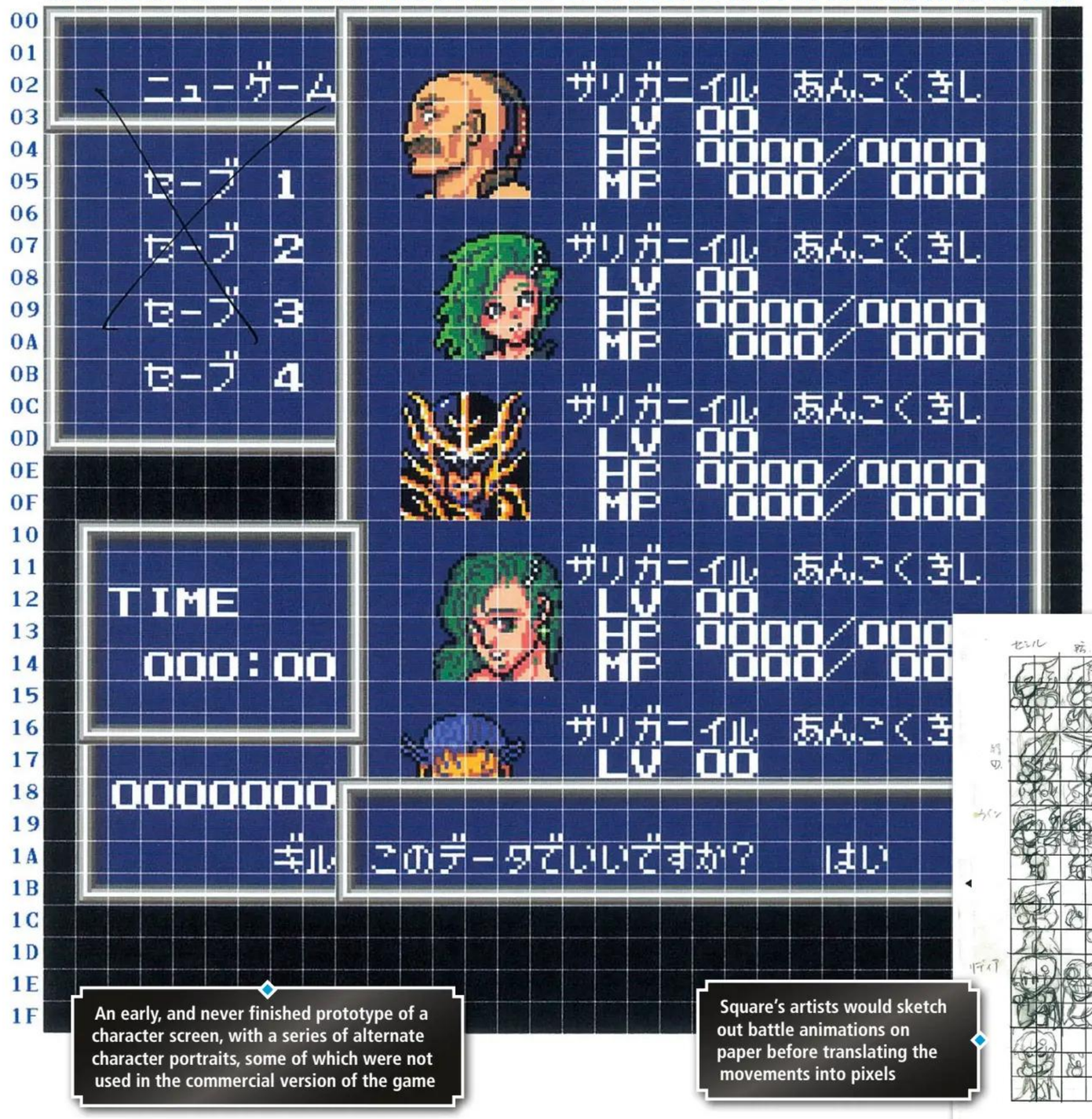
Sakaguchi Every time we made a *Final Fantasy* game all of our ideas would go into it. So when it came to making the next one we would have a completely clean slate. It's difficult to know what to do next. Thinking 'we will make a more exciting story' is too abstract. So we look at the mechanics and what we can do to develop that side of the game. Because we had advanced the characterisation so far in *Final Fantasy IV*, we decided to focus on mechanics for the fifth game.

Characters and systems are like chalk and cheese, or water and oil. They often don't blend. In *Final Fantasy IV*, for example, Cecil's story is reflected in the mechanics as, through his internal struggles, he moves from being a dark knight to becoming a holy knight. With *Final Fantasy V*, however, by giving players more flexibility with the mechanics, allowing them to pick and choose whatever class they wanted to be, it became far harder to tell a deeply personal story. ☞

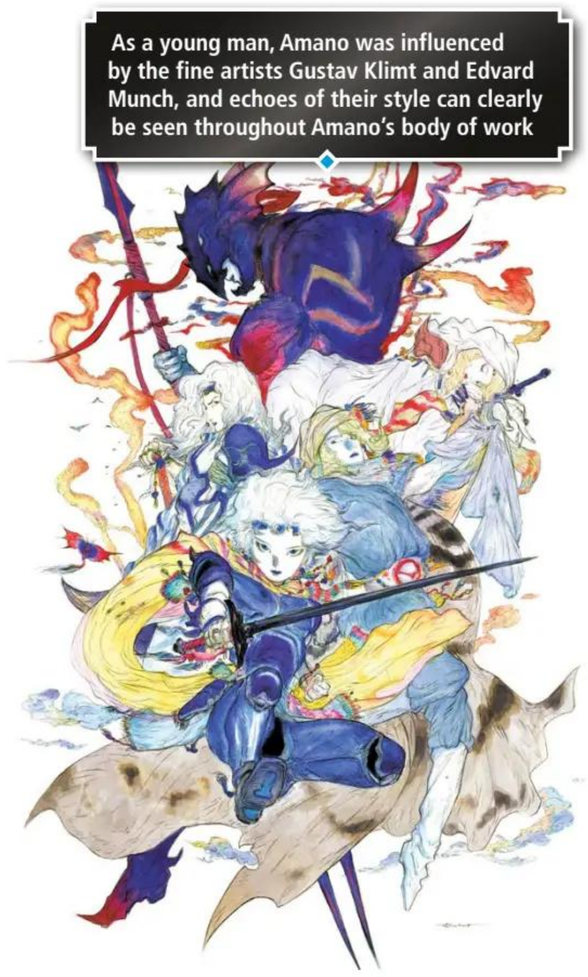
Yoshinori Kitase was instrumental in implementing the use of the Super Nintendo's pseudo-3D Mode 7 technique. He employed the effect, not only for show, but also, in some scenes, for dramatic effect

Tetsuya Nomura

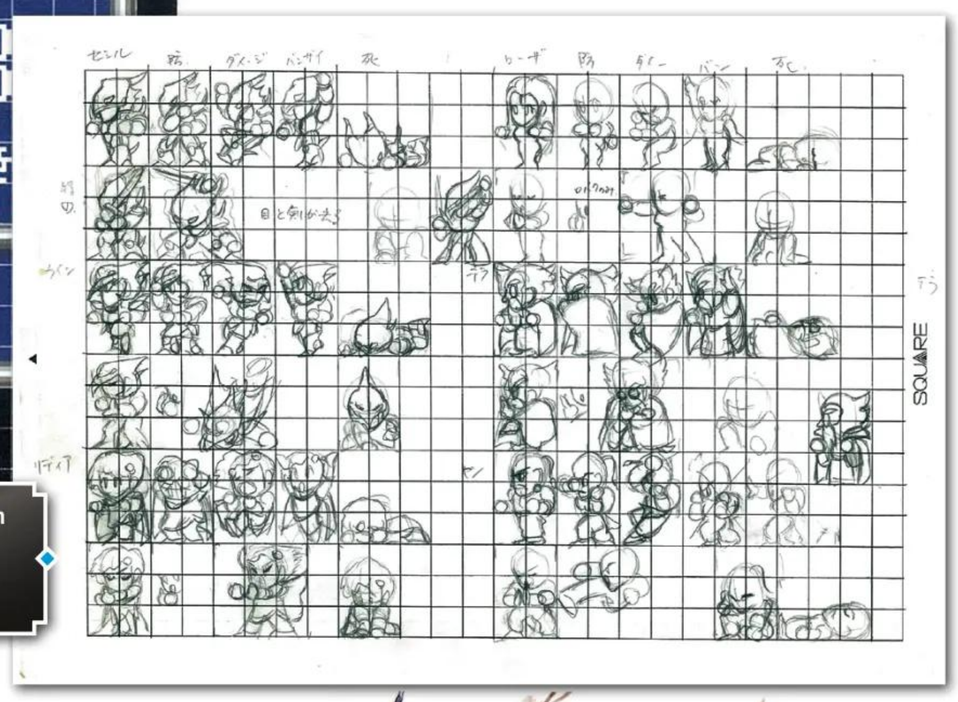
Tetsuya Nomura was born in Kochi on the island of Shikoku, three minutes from the sea, three minutes from the mountains and "surrounded by a wide, blue sky." He says he was drawing before he could walk; a picture of a lion that Nomura drew when he was three still stands on his parents' mantelpiece. At primary school Nomura would copy manga characters into his exercise books, and in middle school he began to design his own boardgames. Nomura's first videogame console was a Simple 10, a system that predates the Famicom, but despite enjoying its simple sports games, Nomura maintains that his only hobby growing up was drawing. At school, he worked a part-time job in a videogame store.



An early, and never finished prototype of a character screen, with a series of alternate character portraits, some of which were not used in the commercial version of the game



As a young man, Amano was influenced by the fine artists Gustav Klimt and Edvard Munch, and echoes of their style can clearly be seen throughout Amano's body of work



Square's artists would sketch out battle animations on paper before translating the movements into pixels

☞ **Kitase** Even though he was in charge of the entire project, management and generally leading development, at that time Sakaguchi still worked alongside the regular members of his team carrying out various programming jobs. He and I worked directly alongside each other on the scenario team for *Final Fantasy V*, splitting work programming the story scenes according to locations in the game.

He designed the opening scene, when you see the morning light come up and the king mount his flying dragon. When he showed us what he'd made it was an amazing moment. We went away and thought deeply about how we could make our sections better. He really led by example. He was my boss, a senior and important person in the company, and yet, in the day to day, we were immediate colleagues, splitting the workload, talking frankly about the problems of the day.

Sakaguchi If you don't do that kind of detailed, involved work then you don't get such a good idea about what the game you're creating is about. But if you're entering the data yourself, it's easy to see what you have to do behind the scenes. A game director might want, say, the lighting in a particular scene to be changed. But if they don't know how the lighting works, they don't understand the scale of the request, whether it's a big or small change.

In many cases, Amano's designs for summonable monsters in the *Final Fantasy* games have come to define the classical mythical creatures on which they are based in the contemporary imagination

Final Fantasy IV's Cecil seen here in illustration, pixel portrait, and super deformed style

It's far better to understand the game you're making holistically. So I continued to work directly on programming right up until the seventh game, after which I stepped back and took more of a standard producer-level role.

Uematsu Up until about *Final Fantasy V*, the pay at Square was terrible. Programmers made a handsome living, of course, because they were seen as the most important guys. But the more creative roles – musicians and artists – did not. In truth, the pay was so bad that at one point I considered getting a part-time job at a convenience store. From *Final Fantasy V* onwards the upper management changed their way of thinking; they knew they had to reward the art and music guys as much as the programmers. My salary almost doubled overnight, which took the pressure off and meant I could even start to save a little.

Nomura At that time, when we started development on a new *Final Fantasy*, all the staff would submit plans and proposals for the game. All the guys who had joined the company before me used PCs to create really clean and professional proposals, but I hand-wrote everything and filled my presentation with pictures. I think my studies of advertising design must have helped me there.

Sakaguchi would assign staff to projects by writing names on a white board, under all the different titles in production. It seems that Sakaguchi must have liked the character designs that I put into my proposals for *Final Fantasy V* because he made me an artist on that game. To be honest, I didn't really have time to feel any sense of elation because it was my first time in this kind of role and I had no idea how games were actually developed.

Kitase This was an exciting time to be in the company. We still had that major rivalry with *Dragon Quest* and we were incredibly motivated to beat their sales. *Dragon Quest V* and *Final Fantasy V* were in development at the same time. We didn't know which game would launch first. We were desperate to know about the themes and idea in their game and leaned on all kinds of industry contacts to try to find out what they were doing.

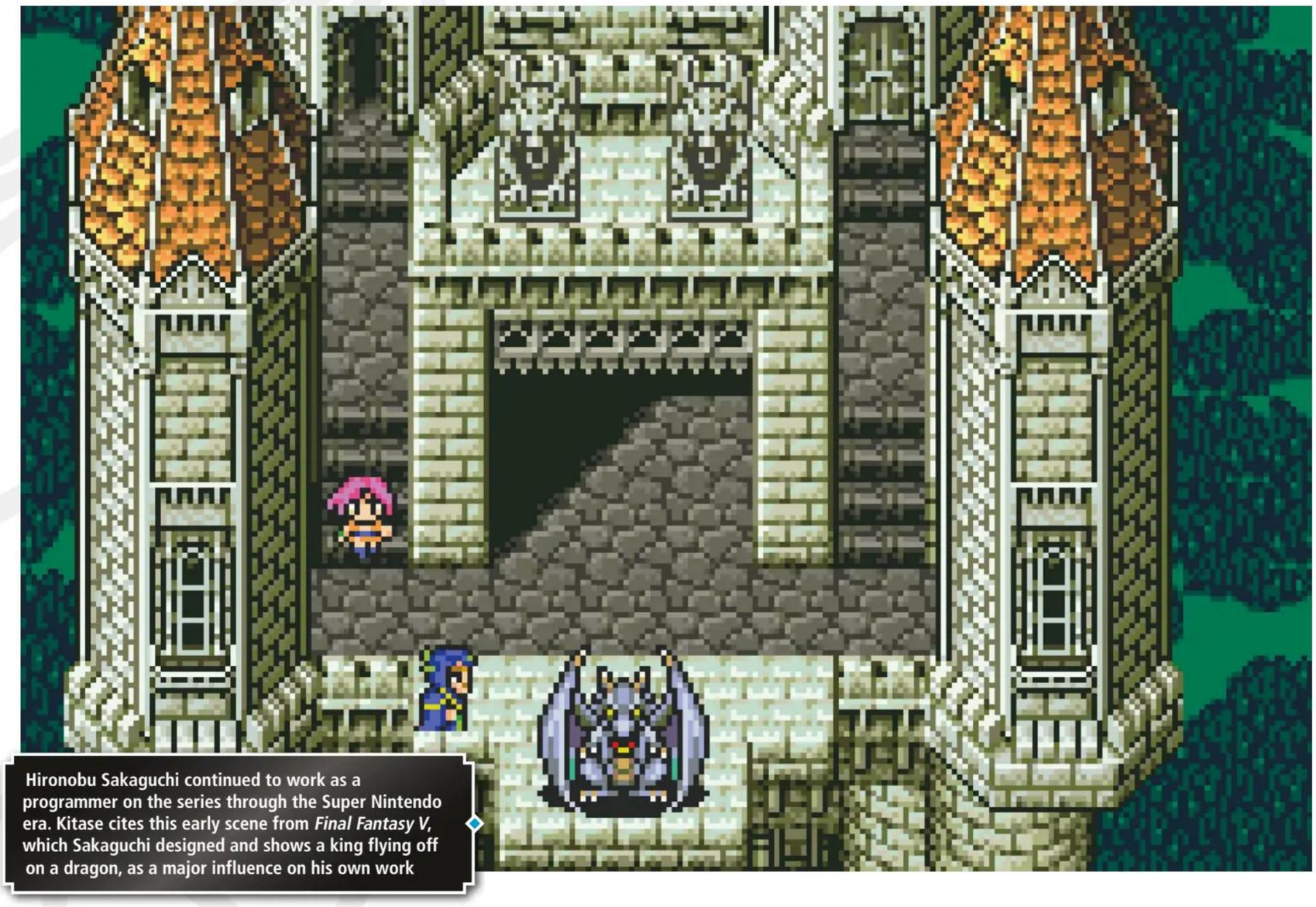
Sakaguchi I don't think we ever managed to get that much information via that kind of subterfuge – certainly never enough to be able to be reactive to what Enix was doing. I do remember, however, that in *Dragon Quest V* you had a choice of which girl you'd like to marry. It was an inspired piece of design. I remember telling my team that we absolutely wouldn't do anything like that. I was so eager to not copy their ideas.

> "The pay was so bad that I considered getting a part-time job at a convenience store"
>
> **Nobuo Uematsu**

Kitase The fact that *Final Fantasy* had made it to a fifth instalment was a major cause of celebration, of course. But there was a general saturation of fantasy RPGs in the market by that point. People were complaining there were too many of them around, so we felt redoubled pressure to introduce new ideas; things that were unexpected for players.

Sakaguchi When it came to starting work on the sixth game, I wanted to approach the story with an ensemble cast, partly to do something completely different for the audience. I first saw this kind of storytelling in *Star Of The Giants*, a sport-themed comic book in which the every member of the team becomes a lead character. I wanted to do something similar with a fantasy story, with lots of different characters that allowed people to root for different leads.

Kitase It was a much larger team on *Final Fantasy VI*. Sakaguchi was still involved in event creation, but his directorial responsibilities took up much more of his time. He left most of the groundwork down to me and the rest of the team. Again I was the scenario-planning guy, which meant it was ☞



Hironobu Sakaguchi continued to work as a programmer on the series through the Super Nintendo era. Kitase cites this early scene from *Final Fantasy V*, which Sakaguchi designed and shows a king flying off on a dragon, as a major influence on his own work

☞ my job to write and direct the cutscenes. To keep things fresh and interesting, I tried to add more of a 3D aspect to these interludes. For example, there is a scene where Daryl plunges to his death. I wanted to give players the sense of depth, of him falling into the screen.

There is one thing I regret about that game. One of its most famous scenes takes place at the opera. In the past there were mystery movies set in opera houses. That was the kind of spooky, opulent ambiance we wanted. Now, I had never been to the opera before I worked on that scene. I had to create it from my imagination, guessing what the opera might be like. Sakaguchi told me to go to the opera before I made that scene but I didn't. I wish I'd gone to get a better sense of the atmosphere before sitting down to recreate it.

I based the look of the auditorium on London's Albert Hall. During the promotion of *Final Fantasy XIII* I had the chance to visit the Albert Hall for the first time. I remember looking around thinking, "Man, I should have come here before making that scene."

Yoshinori Kitase based *Final Fantasy VI's* famous opera scene on the Royal Albert Hall. Hironobu Sakaguchi urged his colleague to visit the opera before creating the scene, but Kitase regrets that he failed to make the time

Amano From the first game to the sixth I would create huge amounts of art for each title – maybe 30 to 40 pieces, including the logo, the general concept art and, of course, the individual character art. *Final Fantasy VI* was the last game for which I created so much material. The first character you meet in that game, Terra, or Tina, as she is called in the Japanese version, remains my favourite. I find her easy to draw.

"I had never been to the opera before I worked on that scene. I had to create it from my imagination"

Yoshinori Kitase

Terra Branford (or Tina, as she is called in the Japanese version) took centre stage on most promotional art for *Final Fantasy VI*. This sprite sheet shows the range of emotions the pixel artists were able to communicate within tight limitations

Story continues on Pg38

FINAL FA

Despite being the fourth game in the series, Final Fantasy IV was only just the beginning of Square's rise to JRPG domination. Original designer Takashi Tokita explains the making of a genre masterpiece

NTASY IV

With sixteen main entries, plus countless sequels and spin-offs, which edition of *Final Fantasy* can be considered the most important? The first is a strong contender, since the series simply wouldn't exist without it. *Final Fantasy VII* is obviously important for catapulting the series into the modern age and introducing the genre to a global audience. But, for our money, it's 1991's *Final Fantasy IV* that may well be the defining moment in the franchise's evolution. It was the first to redefine the JRPG as a more linear, story-focused genre. It introduced the Active Time Battle system, which added new strategies to otherwise standard combat, and went on to dominate the series for many years. And it was the first to put you in control of proper, multi-faceted characters that would actually change as people, shaped by the events of the unfolding narrative.

But enough about *Final Fantasy IV*'s achievements for now. Let's go back to the start and see how this landmark role-playing game came to be. The year was 1990 and Square had just shipped *Final Fantasy III* for the Famicom. A young designer named Takashi Tokita, who had started at the company as a programmer on *Rad Racer* before contributing sound effects to *FFIII*, found himself in charge of the series' first Super Famicom entry as lead designer.

"I guess I did get a credit for the sound effects in *Final Fantasy III*, but that wasn't my main job," Tokita clarifies. "I was involved in

The GBA version of *FFIV* had some interesting changes, as Tokita explains. "There was a new feature where you could change up the party with living members. That was something we always wanted to implement"

FFIV introduced the Active Time Battle system to the *Final Fantasy* series for the first time

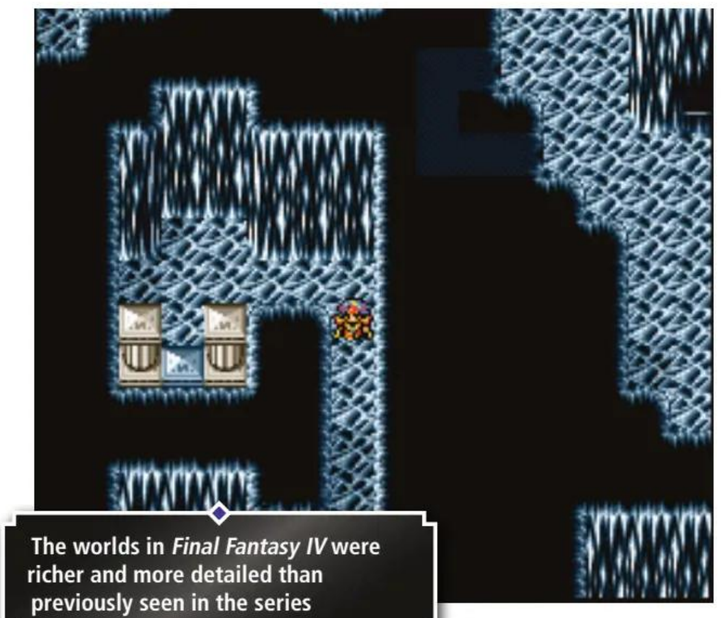
Thar Be Dragons

The *Final Fantasy* series was one of a handful of games responsible for defining what the Japanese RPG would become, but it wasn't the most famous, at least not in its home country. That accolade goes to the phenomenally popular *Dragon Quest*, so we can't help but ask Tokita what he thought of his biggest rival at the time. "There were already existing games like *Ultima* and *Wizardry*. *Dragon Quest* was those two games, with a Japanese type of comic style added; they were the origin of Japanese RPGs for the NES. *Dragon Quest II* was the first RPG that I completed. There, I felt the possibilities of storytelling within a game. That's where I started becoming more interested in the RPG genre. There was motivation among the staff to kind of do something that *Dragon Quest* hadn't done. A lot of the staff had played *Ultima* and *Wizardry* as well, but they really wanted to set out and do something that *Dragon Quest* hadn't done before."

graphic design, and I was also responsible for jotting down ideas, drawing up images. I was kind of involved in every aspect of it; whenever I had some spare time on my hands I got involved in whatever was available. Up until *Final Fantasy III* I was working as a part-timer at the company; I had joined a theatre troupe and I worked on *FFIII* as a part-time job. But, starting with *Final Fantasy IV*, I got an offer to be a full employee of the continued company, and so I became a game designer and *FFIV* was the first job I worked on full-time.

"Back then," Tokita adds, "I was involved in graphics, and then I was given the title of game designer. It was a lot to deal with all of a sudden. I'm kind of surprised that Hironobu Sakaguchi, the director at the time, gave me all that responsibility."

The opportunity presented to Tokita couldn't have had more potential. The first three *Final Fantasy* games had all proven hugely popular in Japan, while the US edition of the first game had just been released that year, and *Final Fantasy IV* would be released there as its direct follow-up. Additionally, this was the first game in the series to be developed for Nintendo's new Super Famicom hardware, so the team would be able to create something even more impressive than any previous entry.



The worlds in *Final Fantasy IV* were richer and more detailed than previously seen in the series

"The biggest difference between the Famicom and Super Famicom," says Tokita, "was the memory, where the ROM and CPU both increased. The number of characters that you could push out into the game increased, and the effects that were made possible were expanded. You could get bigger effects. The memory size played a big role in the effects and sound that were possible in *Final Fantasy IV*." These technological advancements enabled Square to create a richer, more detailed world, with characters that had more distinct designs – both essential features for an RPG – and Tokita is quick to praise the role of the Super Famicom's unique visual tricks in *FFIV*'s design. "I guess the two biggest aspects were that the color variations increased with the SNES platform and that it also had Mode 7, which allowed for rotation of the perspective, the world." Which allowed Square to create a vast overworld, which appeared to expand out far over the horizon. "Boy, that takes me back," he adds after recalling memories that have probably laid dormant for the best part of two decades.

Anyone who's played the original release of *FFIV*, rather than the many remakes that have appeared in recent years, will know that graphics weren't really the game's strong point. It looked more like a slightly more detailed NES game than the big and bold imagery of 1994's *Final Fantasy VI*. Rather, *FFIV*'s emphasis was well and truly on its story and characters, which Tokita personally oversaw with great dedication. "Back in the day, obviously I was involved in the scriptwriting," he confirms.

FFIV was the first game in the series to be developed for Nintendo's new Super Famicom hardware

"Connecting the game through the script was my area, that was my job. Without that, and without that pressure, the game wouldn't have been developed, so that was a great experience on my part. It was interesting for me to be able to create the script and be able to bring it all together from the player's standpoint."

"Back then I only went home once a week, so the rent was kind of a waste," he adds with a chuckle. Tokita certainly put in the hours, and it shows all the way through *Final Fantasy IV*. Previous games in the series may have featured story and characters before, but only in the loosest possible sense of the words. Characters were mere archetypes; custom-named by the player and chosen for their class and skills, they were depicted as generic warriors on an even more generic quest. But in *Final Fantasy IV*, Square introduced a more guided narrative experience in which main character Cecil was anything but one-dimensional. Starting off as a powerful dark knight, Cecil defects from his army after following questionable orders from the king that result in the slaughter of a whole town full of innocent people. From there he embarks on a personal journey that literally transforms him as a character, a quest for redemption that bucked previous RPG trends by portraying an initially flawed hero rather than an idealised one.

Tokita acknowledges that RPGs before *FFIV* were mainly about the freedom of open-world exploration and discovery, but that this contributed to an unfocused, sometimes confusing, experience. For *Final Fantasy IV* he was inspired more by the editing of movies, which allowed the team to create a more dramatic tale that frequently escalated in excitement, right up to its incredible finale on the surface of the moon.

Of course, this new emphasis on storytelling had the effect of streamlining the game to the point where exploration was virtually non-existent and customisation was limited to just the equipment of your characters. But *Final Fantasy IV* was certainly not without a sense of strategy. Its most important innovation was the introduction of the Active Time Battle system, which completely revolutionised the way RPG combat functioned. Previous *Final Fantasy* games worked much like the *Dragon Quest* series, in that they were purely turn-based and could become quite tedious in the length of time they took to play. But in *Final Fantasy IV*, Square tweaked the system so that it was based more on the speed of each character. Commands were still entered through a menu, but would play out almost in real time as characters became ready to perform them. Unlike true turn-based games, this meant that you were constantly engaged by the battles. Get distracted and you could leave yourself open to attack. Fail to input commands quickly and you'd just be wasting valuable time.

Final Fantasy IV is one of the most well-loved SNES titles ever made

"Final Fantasy IV is by far the most remade and re-released Final Fantasy game of all time"

The inspiration behind ATB is perhaps the most unusual in game development history. As the story goes, *FFIV*'s planner, Hiroyuki Itoh, got the idea when watching a Formula 1 race, seeing the way some drivers would overtake and even lap their opponents. In *Final Fantasy IV* this translates as the speed of each character relative to both their allies and enemies. The fastest characters are often able to act twice as often as the slower ones, while big spells can take ages to cast, forcing the mages to effectively duck out of battle for several seconds. It's a masterstroke that forces you to really consider the properties of your party and make careful decisions, weighing time spent against the potential damage dealt.

While sheer inspiration can be credited for some of these accomplishments, *Final Fantasy IV*, like most great games, was made through great effort and iteration, and, as Tokita explains, even some of the greatest struggles eventually resulted in a more polished product. "When we initially wrote up the script," he says by way of example, "there was a lot of long, extended dialogue. We had to cut it down to about one-fourth of its original size. It wasn't like trimming it down; we had to cut out big chunks of it. But it kind of made it more of a condensed, meaty version of the story." This editing exercise has led many to inaccurately assume that entire sections of story are just waiting to be re-inserted into the game, and some have urged Square Enix to add them into one of the remakes, but Tokita remains against the idea. "If we went back and implemented that, it would change the whole experience. It wouldn't be *Final Fantasy IV* any more."

And who would want *Final Fantasy IV* to be any different? For many, it was the first game in the series to really grab them and prove the worth of the Japanese RPG style, and it has therefore become one of the most revered SNES titles made. If you want further proof then look no further than the fact that this is by far the most remade and re-released *Final Fantasy* game of all time, having been ported to the PlayStation, WonderSwan Color and Virtual Console, and remade in many different forms for Game Boy Advance, Japanese mobile phones, PSP and DS... almost all of which were produced under the careful supervision of Tokita himself. It's clearly a game that remains close to the designer's heart even after years of working on other titles. "Of course, there were a lot of people involved in the project," he concedes, "but to bring the title together on my own, to finish it up was a big thing I'm proud of. I connected the maps, established the event scenes. When you put it in movie terms, it was kind of like being a cameraman and an editor at the same time. It helped me be really confident in myself."

Meteor Shower

Game testing can be an arduous process on any game, but on *Final Fantasy IV* it even began to affect the team's ability to take care of personal hygiene, as Tokita recounts. "We were at the end of the testing period. I went home, I took a shower, and when I got back the screen was completely still, nothing was moving anymore – just some mysterious bug that had come up in development. We figured out what the issue was; it was something with the song data, where it was just continuously looping and nothing would come out. Something was wrong with the song files. After all the test players had gone home, we had to connect it to a bunch of different TVs and play each of the songs through to check that they were in line with the game. We had some limitations on whether we could take a shower during the testing process... "

Takashi Tokita
Lead Designer

Hiromichi Tanaka, lead designer of *FFIII* and later head of *FFXI* and *XIV*, was originally meant to design *FFIV* but left to join what would eventually become the *Secret Of Mana* project

FINAL FANTASY V

The secret best Final Fantasy

SUPER NINTENDO ENTERTAINMENT SYSTEM • 1992 (JP), 1999 (NA), 2002 (EU)

If you gathered a hundred *Final Fantasy* fans in a room and asked for their favourite, you'd get a lot of *Final Fantasy VI*s, *VII*s and *X*s, but as you whittled down the numbers, you'd find the true sickos: the *Final Fantasy V* fans. Released just 18 months after its predecessor, *FFV* was on track for a western release as *Final Fantasy III* until, according to translator Ted Woolsey, SquareSoft cancelled the project for being "not accessible enough to the average gamer". Though it wouldn't officially debut in English until 1999, a group of keen fans known as RPGe released an unofficial translation in late 1997, helping kick off a new wave of English fan translations to close out the 16-bit era.

So what were English fans missing out on? Only one of the deepest and most complex games in a deep and complex series. After *Final Fantasy IV*'s focus on plot and character, *FFV* set aside pesky stuff like character development for a beefed-up version of the job system used in each previous odd-numbered title. In pursuit of the deadly Exdeath as they attempt to restore the balance of earthly elements — that's really all there is to the story — Bartz, Faris, Galuf and Lenna can each use one of a dozen classic *Final Fantasy* roles, including White Mage, Monk and Ninja. Mastering jobs allows for mixing and matching job skills, leading to some fun (and truly broken) builds. With this flexibility, *FFV* epitomises the best of *Final Fantasy*'s Dungeons & Dragons-style player agency and provides endless replay value. It's a shame it didn't see an official English release for so long, but that hasn't stopped it from finding the fans it deserves.

Three decades later, with a recent *Pixel Remaster* re-release under its belt, *FFV* is more popular than ever, in large part thanks to Eric Koziol's Final Fantasy Five Four Job Fiesta. This popular community event brings fans together to raise money for various charities by playing through the game using randomly selected jobs. Whether it's your first or tenth time through *FFV*, it's always a fun time.

ULTIMATE GUIDE
FINAL FANTASY VI

Tinged with steam and rebellion, Final Fantasy's last Super NES foray is a classic that does things, and goes places few other games at the time (or since) were willing to try. From its enormous cast, emphasis on player agency, and a truly shocking mid-game twist, Final Fantasy VI has it all

In 1991, hot off the heels of shipping his fifth massively popular *Final Fantasy* title, series creator Hironobu Sakaguchi found no well-deserved rest. Instead, he immediately pivoted to development of the next game in the series, *Final Fantasy VI*, and another major development, this one more personal: he was now a father.

Sakaguchi has always allowed his life experiences to shape his art, from memories of his mother to the science-fantasy mashup of Ultima, he inserts himself into his games in a way that lays bare his most vulnerable moments. And *Final Fantasy VI* (released as *FFIII* in the West) was no different. Even as Sakaguchi's experience as a new father shaped his personal life, it also defined the themes and ideas forming the foundation of his next game: birth, death and rebirth.

Set in a melancholy world of industry, and Empire, *Final Fantasy VI*, like many *Final Fantasy* games before it, is a game about the power of collective action against tyranny and oppression. It opens in the town of Narshe, a northern mining town officially maintaining neutrality in the larger world conflict, but housing a group of rebels called the Returners. When an Imperial Magitek Knight named Terra Branford awakens in the hands of the Returners, with no memory but her name, she sets in motion a series of events that will, quite literally, destroy the world and rebuild it again from the ashes.

"One of our staff really wanted to do something with an industrial revolution atmosphere, so that became the basis: a world of magi-teki armor, metal and machinery," explained Tetsuya Takahashi in 1994 via a shmuplations.com translation. Though *Final Fantasy* had always incorporated some science fiction elements into its world building — going all the way back to the first game in the series, which featured time travel — this industrial, Steampunk style was a major departure for a series

Magitek Knights march toward Narshe

Final Fantasy VI's opening crawl sets the stage for an epic story

that typically dabbled in heavily Dungeons & Dragons-inspired epic fantasy worlds.

"The first thing we did was to collect every individual's ideas, and then we just got started with the actual development," explained Takahashi in the same interview. The graphics director (and *Xenoblade Chronicles* creator) on *Final Fantasy VI* explained that while having a cohesive "master planner doc" was a valid way to build a game, his team didn't work that way. "That's not how things work at Square. We develop the game in an on-going way, by mixing together everyone's ideas and input."

Like its wide-ranging creative team, *Final Fantasy VI* focuses heavily on its ensemble cast, without a traditional main character. With over 14 playable characters, its cast of heroes dwarfed other games in the series, and was significantly larger than other contemporary games. This created a different type of player agency from earlier *Final Fantasy* titles, by allowing the player to craft their party around different characters – each with their own special ability – rather than a bevy of Jobs. Best yet, through the use of Magicite, the game's equippable magic stones that helped characters learn new magic and altered their stat growth, you could even turn burly martial artist Sabin into a top-tier White Mage, or diminutive Relm into a physical beast. The options were endless.

This large cast of characters was a collaborative effort. Takahashi created the Magitek Armor in the opening credits scroll, his wife and fellow *Xenogears* creator Soraya Saga created twin princes Edgar and Sabin Figaro, and *Kingdom Hearts* creator Tetsuya Nomura came up with the mysterious ninja Shadow and the melancholy gambler Setzer.

"For a game with over 14 playable party members, a war tale spanning an entire continent, and an iconic villainous clown that threatens to derail the whole vibe but instead makes it all the more memorable – *Final Fantasy VI* is almost unbelievably coherent," said Nomura in a 2024 GamesRadar interview.

> "This industrial, Steampunk style was a major departure for a series that typically dabbled in heavily Dungeons & Dragons-inspired epic fantasy worlds"

Updating a classic *How do you perfect perfection?*

With *Final Fantasy VII* launching the console RPG genre into the stratosphere, and making the PlayStation the go-to console for RPG fans, Square Enix went digging in its back catalogue of legendary Super NES RPGs for games it could reintroduce to a suddenly much larger and more fervent audience. In 1999, it released *Final Fantasy Anthology* in North America, which included the first official English release of *Final Fantasy V* and a more-or-less straight port of *Final Fantasy VI*. Besides a couple of CGI cutscenes and minor features like a sound room and bestiary, all it really added to *Final Fantasy VI* were irritating load times. *Final Fantasy Anthology* was released in Europe in 2002, but, oddly, it included *Final Fantasy IV* and *V*, instead. While Nintendo and Square parted ways during their acrimonious split over disagreements about *Final Fantasy VII* and optical media, they eventually kissed and made up, and among their first projects were portable re-releases of *Final Fantasies IV-VI* on the Game Boy Advance.

Every millennial dreamed of being able to play Super NES games on the go, and these delivered with terrific conversions of many classic games… as long as you can get used to its brighter colour palette and fuzzy music. If you can, you'll find a bevy of fixed bugs and extra content: including a fresh localisation, extra dungeons and a new super boss, the Kaiser Dragon.

Suited up in Magitek Armor, Terra blasts a wolf in the Game Boy Advance edition of *Final Fantasy VI*.

Dramatis Personae

KEY PLAYERS IN FINAL FANTASY VI'S MASSIVE CAST

Terra Branford

As *Final Fantasy VI*'s story wefts and wends around its primary protagonist, Terra undergoes huge physical and emotional changes as she discovers her magical heritage.

Kefka Palazzo

He might look like a clown, but Kefka brings no joy. Broken by experiments meant to turn him into a supersoldier, *Final Fantasy VI*'s antagonist does something few evil villains manage: he wins.

Celes Chere

A respected general in the Gestahlian Empire, the Rune Knight Celes is torn between loyalty to the country that's given her everything, and the strong morals and sense of justice that reside deep within her.

Locke Cole

Everybody's favourite thief… err, treasure hunter, Locke Cole is running from the past and trying to find every chest, gem and adventure he can along the way. His frivolous demeanour hides a heart of gold.

Maduin

A magical Esper living in Esper Village, Maduin sets *Final Fantasy VI*'s plot in motion when he meets a young human named Madeline Branford. Forbidden love, and a daughter named Terra, follow.

Cid

Every *FF* needs its Cid, and this time around he's a reclusive Gestahlian scientist in a yellow rain slicker working to figure out how to convert the magic of Espers into Magicite usable by human soldiers.

Emperor Gestahl

Gestahl bit off more than he could chew when he started trying to make supersoldiers by harnessing the magic of Espers. But at least he serves up a mean banquet meal before his Empire burns.

General Leo Cristophe

You know how every RPG has that cool character who joins you for a few fights? That's General Leo. He's a bad guy, but he's also the best. There were rumours about how players could get him to join their team.

Final Fantasy VI features some of the most beautiful combat background scenes on the Super NES

Facing down against Kefka in his final form is one of the most iconic battles in the series' history

Playing today *There's never been a better time to play Final Fantasy VI*

After its original release on the Super NES, *Final Fantasy VI* has seen regular re-releases and remasters on various platforms. None of them are perfect, though they each made attempts to add to the original experience (to varying degrees of success). Nowadays, the most practical way to play *Final Fantasy VI* comes as part of Square Enix's massive *Pixel Remaster* set, which saw major remasters of all the 8 and 16-bit games. These versions offer newly polished pixel-art graphics for each game – leading to a consistent look between all six titles for the first time, including new character sprites redrawn by series creator Kazuko Shibuya – and are widely available on all major gaming platforms and mobile devices.

Whether you buy them as a bundle or pick them up individually, they're all loving renditions of these classic games, but they're also not without flaws. Though Square Enix added a 'retro' option to swap out the generic sans-serif font that launched with the original release, the typography is still awkwardly tiny and inconsistent, which might lead to a problem for some players on smaller screens, and they use the brighter colour palette from the Game Boy Advance re-releases, which is very apparent in *Final Fantasy VI*, which used deeper, richer tones to sell its uniquely dystopian world. Despite these quibbles, they're still some of the best games ever made, and easier to play than ever.

A Megalodoth blasts Locke and a party of Moogles with a Snowstorm attack in the Nintendo Switch version of *Final Fantasy VI Pixel Remaster*

For a game that the series creator considers the most "complete" in the series, *Final Fantasy VI* had a surprisingly hasty development period. Development began in December 1992, shortly after the release of its predecessor, *Final Fantasy V*, and was released less than a year-and-a-half later in Japan, on 2 April 1994. It followed shortly thereafter in October 1994 in North America, but would not officially hit PAL regions until its release on PlayStation in 2002. While the setting and cast size underwent seismic shifts, *Final Fantasy VI*'s core gameplay was recognisable to series fans. Retaining the Active Time Battle system introduced in *Final Fantasy IV* and used all the way until the series' transition to PlayStation 2 in 2001, *FFVI* emphasised quick combat, a large world to explore and a lot of player agency in character building and party construction.

Ditching the series' popular Job system, which featured heavily in three previous games, *Final Fantasy VI* returned to the more predefined characters of *Final Fantasy IV*, each with its own special ability that matched the Job they best suited. Sabin the martial artist used fighting game-style controller inputs to unleash his Blitz attacks, patient Samurai Cyan waited for an ability bar to slowly reach increasingly more powerful attacks, Rune Knight Celes could absorb enemy magic, and wild child Gau learned attacks directly from enemies.

While *Final Fantasy VI* starts off with a linear structure reminiscent of most other console RPGs available at the time, there's a segment a couple of hours in that forces the player's party into three smaller groups, all with their own missions that you can tackle in any order, once completed, you face down against the game's antagonist, the villainous clown and Gestahlian General Kefka, on a snowy field of battle that requires you to balance all of your gathered characters across three parties.

This taste of nonlinearity leads to one of the most climactic moments in series (and genre) history. As the party faces down Kefka again, desperate to stop him from gaining the power of the Warring Triad, a trio of magical statues on the Floating Continent, something altogether surprising happens: they lose. Kefka wins. The world ends.

"For a game that the series creator considers the most 'complete' in the series, Final Fantasy VI had a surprisingly hasty development period"

Memorable Monsters

Legendary artist Yoshitaka Amano stuffed FFVI full of classic beasts

Whelk
Final Fantasy VI's very first boss has some tricks up its sleeve. Attack while its head is visible and you'll be victorious in no time. Attack its shell? You'll get blasted.

Vargas
This hard-working martial artist stews under the belief his father, the legendary instructor Duncan Harcourt, favours fellow student, and fan favourite, Sabin Figaro.

Ghost Train
Do you remember the first time you suplexed a train? The Ghost Train caps off one of *Final Fantasy VI*'s most melancholy moments with well-earned absurdity.

Ultros
Everybody's favourite octopus shows up to cause trouble when you least expect it, and adds a load of drama to Celes' famous opera house performance.

Chupon
SNORT. Hope you brought a tissue, because Ultros' best buddy's got a bad case of the sneezes, and he'll blow you right off your airship if he takes critical damage.

Atma Weapon
Created alongside the sword of the same name, Atma Weapon guards the Warring Triad and acts as the final boss before the World Of Balance falls into Ruin.

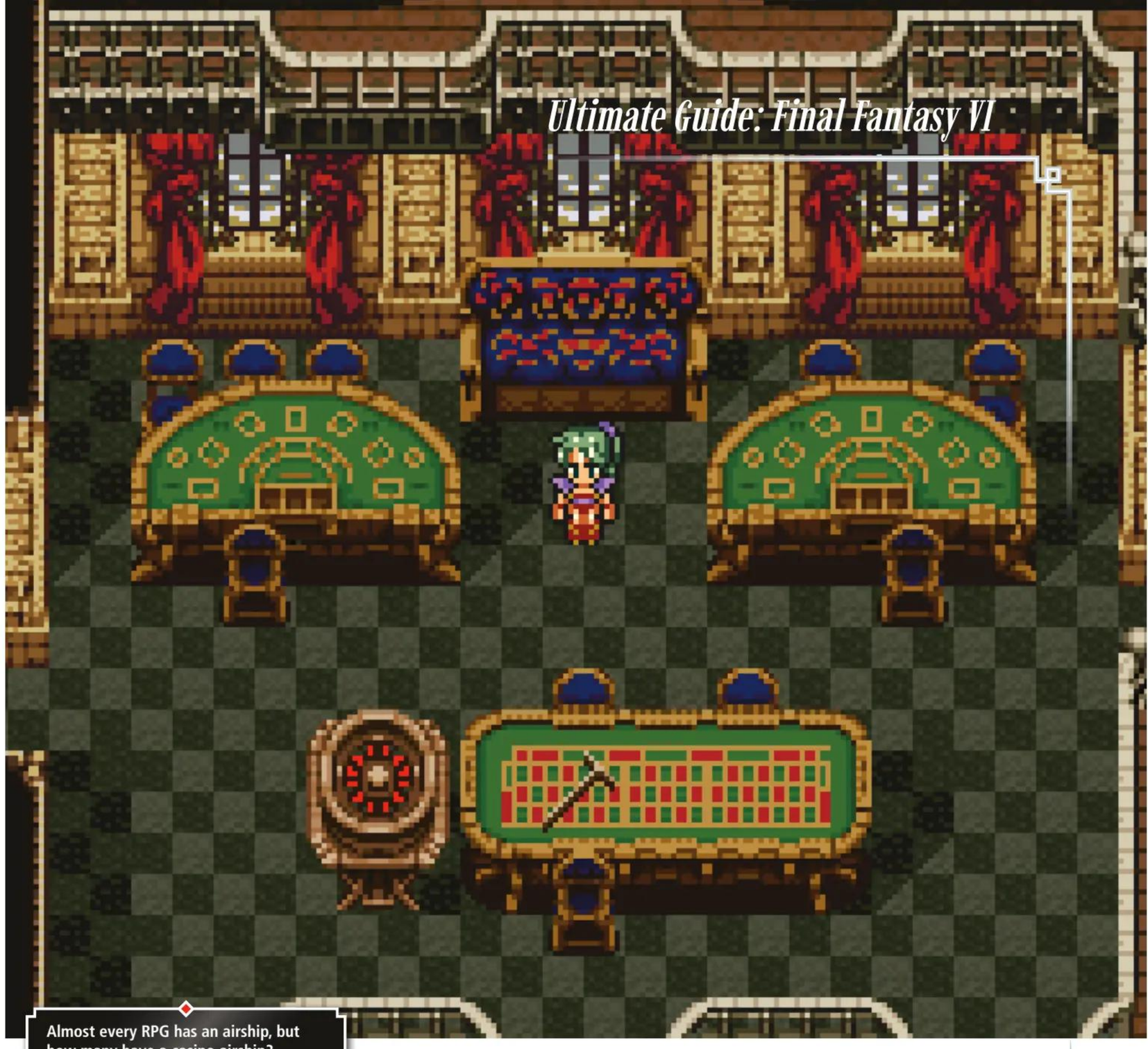
The story picks up a year later with Celes, who is living on a small deserted island. With her is Cid, a former Gestahlian scientist largely responsible for the technology used to exploit the magical Espers. Together, seemingly alone in the World Of Ruin, Celes must gather fish from a nearby beach to feed Cid. Unbeknownst to the player, feeding Cid the wrong fish leads him to severe illness and death. This melancholy opening to the game's second act is steeped in guilt, regret and longing and culminates in an examination of suicidal ideation and hope.

Escaping the island, Celes must scour the world during a non-linear second half, seeking out her former companions – some of whom have gone into hiding, others helping as many people as they can – to reassemble the team and defeat Kefka, who now uses the magic of the Warring Triad to lock what remains of the world under an iron fist.

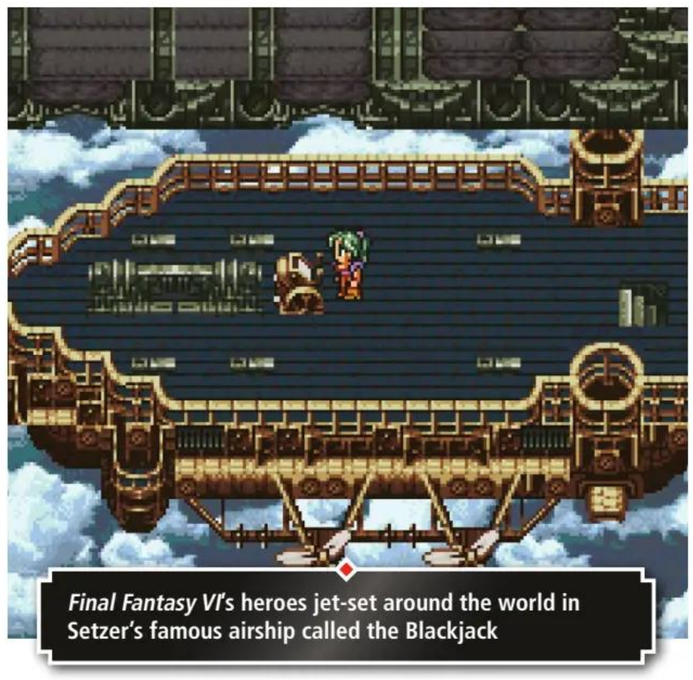
Tying this all together is a scene earlier in the game where you see the relationship between Terra Branford's human mother, Madeline, and Esper father, Maduin, blossom and eventually result in her birth, kicking off the game's main events. "I wanted to have a scene in *FFVI* where there's a child who's born," Sakaguchi said in a 2021 IGN interview. "This idea of bringing new life into the world and what that means and the kind of gravity that it has."

Like a baby relying on their parents for every need, Terra's personality in *Final Fantasy VI*'s first act was purposefully passive, explained Sakaguchi in a *Famitsu* interview translated by OneMillionPower. "We did that because we wanted to show her growth as the story progresses. In the process of being manipulated and used by others, she gradually awakens to her own destiny. The awakening of the self, of one's own humanity – those are her themes."

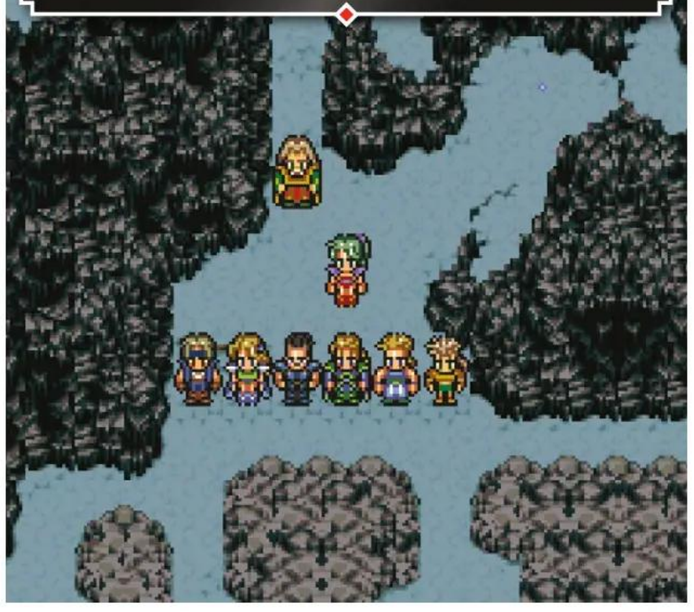
As a new father who once described parenthood as the most "emotionally moving" experience in life, Hironobu Sakaguchi's experiences bringing new life into the world is integral to *Final Fantasy VI*'s story of birth and rebirth, and the power we have in our lives to make good on our promises and build something better out of our mistakes. It's never too late to fight for a better world for those who come after.



Almost every RPG has an airship, but how many have a casino airship?



Final Fantasy VI's heroes jet-set around the world in Setzer's famous airship called the Blackjack



Led by Bannon and Terra, the Returners prepare for battle against the Imperial General Kefka and his troops

Doom Gaze

Doom Gaze can be found flying high above the World Of Ruin and will flee from battle after a few turns. Fortunately, his HP doesn't recover between bouts.

Tritoch

FFVI's first McGuffin, the Esper Tritoch (also known as Valigarmanda) is found deep in the Narshe mines and is a master of elemental magic.

Kefka

Who knew everybody's favourite clown was so ripped? With twice as many wings as Sephiroth, it's clear who takes the title of *FF*'s best villain.

Brachosaur

Killing Brachosaurs in the World Of Ruin was torturous for a kid who loved dinosaurs, but it was the best method for grinding late in the game.

Behemoth

Among *FF*'s most iconic monsters, Behemoth packs a wallop, helping make the Floating Continent one of the toughest dungeons in the game.

MagiTek Armor

While you get to ride one of these bad boys at the start of the game, it's not long before you're facing them down in battle. Fun fact: the Magitek Armor featured in *Final Fantasy VI*'s opening march across the snow was designed by *Xenoblade Chronicles* creator Tetsuya Takahashi!

CHAPTER IV

A New Dimension

Shinji Hashimoto

One night, after work at Bandai, one of my friends invited me to drinks and karaoke. Sakaguchi happened to be there. This was some time before we worked together. I remember he was a very good singer. Everybody in the game industry knew each other at that time.

Because, while at Bandai, I had worked with Yuji Horii and Akira Toriyama on *Dragon Ball*, when they started collaborating with Square on *Chrono Trigger*, I left to join them. My job was to manage the budget and the promotion, and I was also the guy who ran between Sakaguchi, Horii and Toriyama. Things haven't changed much: it's the same today with *Kingdom Hearts*. When I joined Square I was employee number 256. Today that's the number of people you have in just one of Square's 12 business divisions, which gives you an idea of how much we have grown since then.

Kitase Sakaguchi was involved in *Chrono Trigger* right from the start, while we were still making *Final Fantasy VI*. The game brought together the creators of *Final Fantasy* and *Dragon Quest*, so it was an important project. But the project ran into lots of problems because it was being developed for lots of different platforms, some of which were experimental. The schedule had fallen behind, so I was pulled off *Final Fantasy VI* to help get things back on track. Once *Final Fantasy VI* was finished, Sakaguchi dedicated his full attention to *Chrono Trigger*, leading the battle-planning team, while I worked on the scenario.

Hashimoto *Chrono Trigger* is relevant because it was the first time that Square had really collaborated with external companies on a game. Prior to that, Sakaguchi had run everything internally. My job was to broker a lot of these collaborations with other studios and companies. A lot of games, such as *Front Mission* and *Treasure Hunter G*, came out of this new way of doing things and it established the role that I would take on *Final Fantasy VII*, when the switch from 2D to 3D polygonal graphics meant that we needed to find people who were able to do that kind of work.

Sakaguchi I had always wanted to sell more games to the US market. I wanted to conquer it but nothing we tried ever worked. In the pixel-art era, RPG games had an image of being over-complicated. At the time they were seen as childish – something for children's cartoons. That all changed with *Final Fantasy VII*.

Approaching that era, it was clear that everything was going to move into 3D. We could see the future of videogames on the horizon, but we had no idea what a 3D RPG would look like. We created a demo of *Final Fantasy* in 3D with a small team of eight people working on silicon workstations that cost millions of dollars. We took that demo to CG shows, gathering information and figuring out what we'd need, power and capacity-wise, to make an entire game in that style. It was clear, looking at the Nintendo 64 and the PlayStation specification, that we'd need to move to CD-ROMs. That's what drove the decision to switch from Nintendo to Sony.

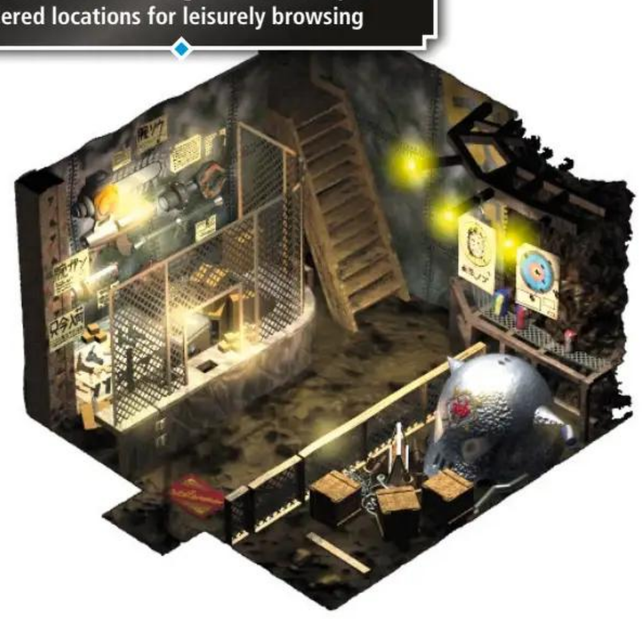
Final Fantasy VII marked a change in approach for the series, as it switched from competing with the likes of *Dragon Quest* and other JRPGs to focusing on the Western market

Hashimoto At that time Sakaguchi and I would often talk about why *Final Fantasy* didn't sell more games in the West. Maybe it was the unrealistic characters? He was also thinking about the benefits of CD-ROM compared to cartridges. It wasn't just the storage capacity that was an issue. If you needed to re-print a game that sold well, burning more discs was a lot easier and more affordable than manufacturing more cartridges.

> "My job was to broker a lot of collaborations with other companies"
>
> **Shinji Hashimoto**

Then, when we met with Sony, they were extremely eager to work with us. Kaz Hirai and Andrew House explained that *Final Fantasy* would be a key game for Sony, and they would put a lot of effort into the game's promotion. That hugely helped. Previously we'd always done everything under our own steam.

The Japanese-only release of *Final Fantasy VII: International* was sold with a bonus disc that features all of the game's 330 3D, pre-rendered locations for leisurely browsing



Shinji Hashimoto

Shinji Hashimoto grew up in Niigata, on the northern coast of Japan. When he was ten, the town became the centre of a scandal following the kidnapping of Megumi Yokota, a 13-year-old girl, who was abducted by North Korea – an outrage that is still discussed today. Following the kidnapping, Hashimoto and his parents moved to Tokyo. While he was at university, Hashimoto became a freelance writer on TV and anime, and became an expert in Gundam. This led to a job at the toy manufacturer Bandai, where he worked on the Gundam line of toys. Through his job he came to know Yuji Horii and Akira Toriyama, the creators of *Dragon Quest*. When Horii and Toriyama collaborated with Hironobu Sakaguchi on *Chrono Trigger*, Hashimoto moved over to Square.

The shift between the squat polygonal characters seen during play to the rangy, slick avatars on show in the pre-rendered movies jars in *Final Fantasy VII*

Sakaguchi We went to Los Angeles and visited an advertising agency there about how we could market the game in the West. Sony helped arrange the meeting and booked it in this downtown restaurant near Disneyland. I remember walking in and wondering why on Earth we were there.

Hashimoto Up until then our US branch had been based in Seattle, where Nintendo was based. When the decision was made to switch to Sony, we didn't need to be there any more, so I was quite involved in scouting out and setting up the Los Angeles office, which we still have now. Sakaguchi's sheer motivation and drive to get things done at that time was extremely impressive. It was a lot of fun to be around for that ride.

> "I wanted to conquer the US but nothing we ever tried worked"
>
> **Hironobu Sakaguchi**

Kitase The memory available from CD-ROM was a huge thing for us. Memory had been so limited up until that point: every byte and bit was valuable. We would endlessly compress things just to make them as small as possible to fit on the ROM. But this process would often introduce bugs in the system. Back then it wasn't like now, where you have automated tools to tell you where the problems lay. So I remember seeing CD-ROM as representing freedom: we would finally be free of the process of compression and debugging. It was both exciting and liberating.

Uematsu When we started work on *Final Fantasy VII* I was very happy at the start: I thought, 'We really are free now, we can use music properly recorded in a studio.' I did some experiments to see how it would all work. It quickly became clear, however, that the higher the quality of music, the longer the load times. That seemed to me to be a major problem for a videogame; you can't make players wait for ages to play the game while it loads every scene. So I deliberately held back and used the internal sound generation of the PlayStation, rather than streaming recorded music.

But when I saw the finished game I realised the visuals were so deep and detailed that they had made the load times long anyway. I asked myself, "Why am I compromising when they aren't?" That's why, with *Final Fantasy VIII*, I used an orchestra and a choir for the opening piece of music (laughs). Was it the proper decision to prioritise sound quality over gameplay like this? Well, even now I am not sure it's right for a game company.

Kitase The way *Final Fantasy VII*'s story was written is interesting. We split the responsibility between myself, Nomura and Kazushige Nojima. We would each take a week at a time to do a pass on the script. So I'd write a plot and then, after a week, pass it to the next guy. They'd then change bits, add scenes and tweak it to their tastes and ideas. In this way we took it in turns to build up the story. We wanted the way the player related to the

With more than 40 minutes of pre-rendered cutscenes, the decision to switch development platform from Nintendo's cartridge-based system to Sony's untested PlayStation was, as Kitase once put it, "made for them"

Tetsuya Nomura's concept art for *Final Fantasy VII* firmly pushed the series in a new direction which has been broadly followed ever since

For Yoshinori Kitase, the lighter, more romantic tone of *Final Fantasy VIII* was chosen in response to the seriousness of the preceding game. Sakaguchi, however, was unconvinced by the changes

The game's opening piece of music, Liberi Fatali, was played during the women's synchronised swimming event at the 2004 Olympics in Athens

☞ character to change. Up until that point there had always been a one-to-one equivalence between the player and the character in *Final Fantasy*. *Dragon Quest* games have always been like that too: the player is exactly the same person as the protagonist. We wanted to move away from that and have a side of Cloud that the player didn't see till later: you thought he was you, but then we pulled back the curtain and players could see that he was someone else. This was a way to play with, or break, the orthodoxy of RPG design. It had never been done till then, I don't think.

Nomura I actually started designing characters on *Final Fantasy VI*. But Sakaguchi was concerned that people were not aware it was me who had drawn the characters, so from *Final Fantasy VII* onwards he told me that he would put my designs to the fore. That is how the characters in that game came to be widely recognised by the public. Nothing really changed for me within the studio, though. If that kind of success had led to me being highly lauded by my colleagues, then I may have felt intimidated when coming to design new characters, but that didn't happen, so I felt just the same as before.

Sakaguchi We had a feeling that this game was going to be special. In terms of the premise, it was something that I had been holding on to for some time. I had imagined the world years before, and its core themes about the way we treat the Earth, and the idea that, when we die, we turn into energy and are assimilated into the Earth and reborn somewhere else. I knew that this was the game where we would win or lose the war; so I decided to bring the world out.

Kitase There wasn't any debate as to whether we should kill Aerith or not. Obviously the story writing was a collaborative effort, so we all agreed we wanted to go that way. I had a personal reason for wanting Aerith to die in that way. At the time the results of a survey had been published in which they asked children whether or not they thought people could come back from the dead. More than 50 per cent of children answered in the affirmative. Why is that? It must have something to do with fairytales: the idea that the princess dies and, with a kiss from the prince, is revived. Likewise, in RPGs, players are often killed off then magically revived. I started to feel self-doubt about how people were extrapolating from fiction into reality. I wanted to get across with Aerith's death the idea of loss: the feeling you only realise the importance of people when they're gone, and you feel the loss and sadness.

Sakaguchi Part of the reason for Aerith's death was to answer the question, 'How can we surprise the player, shock them and show them something they've never seen before?' People see her die and expect her to be revived. The fact she isn't is memorable. It stays with people, and makes an impression.

Kitase In games, a character dies and everyone thinks she'll come back later, even more powerful than before. I wanted that weight of a death, and to make it feel real and proper. The reason we had Aerith die was not because I'd had experience with death; it more felt like a responsibility on our part. If children believed people came back from the dead because of our games, in some way, then we had a chance to change that perspective.

Amano With each new *Final Fantasy* game I am asked to create a subtle image to go behind the game's logo. I always draw these as a full picture, as a piece of art in their own right. With some games it's an actual character, but with *Final Fantasy VII* it was a meteor. That was a hard one. (laughs) I can't tell you how many times I had to re-draw that meteor.

Yoshitaka Amano drew the meteor that was used for *Final Fantasy VII*'s logo numerous times before he settled on a design with which Square was happy

Sakaguchi designed *Final Fantasy IX* as a tribute to the traditional fantasy games in the series

Kitase *Final Fantasy VII* was the turning point for the series. The visual style was based on the manga style and then we decided to go for a more realistic approach. There was a huge amount of passionate debate but, in the end, I believe it was the right decision. It put the series on the track it's taken ever since. Without that switch, I think *Final Fantasy XIV* and *XV* would have been very different games. After *Final Fantasy VII* came out, our rivalry with *Dragon Quest* changed. They didn't seem like rivals any more. We were now focused on competing with Western games.

Sakaguchi I wasn't directly involved in *Final Fantasy VIII*. I left it to another team to develop and let them do what they wanted with it, and take it in their own direction.

Kitase There was a gear shift with the story in *Final Fantasy VIII*. I think it was to do with the seriousness of the previous game's theme. I promoted that approach. Because we'd had this heavy, deep story with *Final Fantasy VII* and Cloud's past and Aerith's death, I said: "Let's make things a little lighter and more cheerful now."

Amano It's the same for me. I always basically approach every game as if this will be the final one, and try and create something new and different than what's gone before, so it'll be completely different. For example, if the protagonist had a certain kind of hairstyle in one game, when I move onto the next one I try and do something in a completely different style. There will be connections, of course, but I always try to approach it as if it will be the last one in the series and make something final and unique.

Kitase Fan feedback definitely informed our approach with *Final Fantasy VIII*. For example, we were often asked why characters received money for killing monsters. People thought it was strange, which is a valid criticism. So in *Final Fantasy VIII* you don't get money from beating the monsters; instead you receive a salary that's paid directly into your account at regular intervals. Likewise, this is what informed the decision to start the game in a high school, a more upbeat location.

Sakaguchi To be honest, when I heard their idea to write the game like a high-school drama I was concerned. But having told them they could go in their own direction, I couldn't very well take it back.

Kitase When Sakaguchi first saw the demo at the school, and a realistically proportioned human character, he said to me: "Hmm, that looks okay, but might you consider doing it with more deformed characters?" He believed that is what the series should look like. I considered what he said, but ended up sticking to my guns.

Sakaguchi Because of the approach they took with that game, I pulled the rudder hard back the other way with *Final Fantasy IX*. I wanted to go right back to the beginning of the series, with a traditional fantasy story: knights, castles and so on. I figured that would calibrate and restabilise the series, somehow.

Kitase I wasn't involved in *Final Fantasy IX* because Sakaguchi and a new team that we had established in Hawaii were making it in parallel to *Final Fantasy VIII*. Part of the reason it looks the way that it does is because we had a big debate about the art style on the PlayStation. The debate centred around whether we should keep the manga-style, deformed characters of the sixth game, or aim for a more realistic approach and develop in that direction. In the seventh and eighth games the new direction won out, but Sakaguchi really wanted to do a classic-looking game on the new technology, which is where *Final Fantasy IX* came in.

The cloak worn by Princess Garnet while escaping Alexandria is designed to resemble the White Mage's outfit from the original *Final Fantasy*

"With every game I try and create something new and different than what's gone before"

Yoshitaka Amano

Final Fantasy IX's ending was much argued over by the development team in Hawaii. In one interview, Sakaguchi claimed that it was changed no fewer than seven times

Story continues on Pg56

In the mid-Nineties, Square's flagship franchise abandoned Nintendo's hardware and embraced the PlayStation, a move that would lead to Final Fantasy VII, an ambitious, refined and enormously influential RPG. Director Yoshinori Kitase and art director Yusuke Naora discuss the creation of this masterpiece with us in unprecedented depth. Steven Spielberg's Jaws fits into it somewhere, as we discover...

FINAL FAN

Without hyperbole, *Final Fantasy VII* is the RPG that changed the genre. Opening the floodgates globally to Japan's distinct brand of role-playing and popularising the JRPG genre, the 14-million-plus-selling game was, for many players, their introduction to the potential of interactive storytelling and the first videogame narrative to leave a mark on them. It's also divisive, anecdotally referred to as the most returned game of all time and often criticised by Western RPG veterans – yet such cynicism can't mask the impact it had upon release in 1997. Along with *Gran Turismo*, *Final Fantasy VII* shifted millions of PlayStation consoles by demonstrating the machine's capabilities, captivating gamers with a fictional universe of unrestrained scope and style that would govern an entire corner of the industry. Back when the game was being created, Square (today known as Square Enix) was a company in transition, and the influx of talent that brought *Final Fantasy VII* into being, as well as a development culture that fostered creativity, was ultimately responsible for this deservedly celebrated RPG.

At the 1995 SIGGRAPH computer graphics convention in Los Angeles, Square presented an interactive demo to the world that showcased its *Final Fantasy* property in unprecedented fashion. This project depicted three characters from *Final Fantasy VI* fighting a Golem enemy in full 3D, a jaw-dropping contrast to the sprite-based 2D roots of the game, complete with visual effects and cinematic in-battle camera angles that implied a future beyond the static staging of the series' stories up until that point. When you look at the tech demo now, you can absolutely see the founding technical conceit of *Final Fantasy VII* embedded within it. Square saw that *Final Fantasy* could be so much more on a platform that allowed ☞

TASY VII

the company to experiment with such high-end technical ideas.

The SIGGRAPH project would form the 'seed', as producer and creator Hironobu Sakaguchi dubbed it on a promotional video for the game, of *Final Fantasy*'s move into the next console generation. To any seasoned gamer, the most well-known part of the development of *Final Fantasy VII* is the defection that started it all. Long considered a Nintendo stalwart since the original *Final Fantasy*'s release on the NES in 1987, Square shifted to Sony's PlayStation for its CD-ROM capabilities over the Nintendo 64's comparatively limited cartridge media. This fitted the company's grand ambitions of this new, generation-defining sequel.

"We were fans of Nintendo's hardware, although in order to use CG movies in the game like we intended, we needed a lot of storage space, and for that reason decided on a platform that used the higher-capacity CD media," director Yoshinori Kitase tells us.

It is ironic that this franchise would soar on a Sony platform, given that Nintendo famously broke away from an agreement for CD-enabled SNES collaboration with the electronics giant earlier in the decade. The emerging disc format enabled *Final Fantasy VII* to be far more cinematic than its forebears – an important factor, especially to Sakaguchi. Yet an interesting factor in all this was the set of technical influences on the team, many of whom were from Western game development, as Kitase explains to us: "We looked at trends in the foreign-made PC games of the time, such as *Alone In The Dark* and *Heart Of Darkness* [and so on], and made it our objective to combine together smooth action sequences using polygon-based characters and clever camera work with the insertion of effective CG movies at a high level. I believe that we pretty much achieved our goals in this regard."

The move from Nintendo to PlayStation gave the team more much-needed storage

With its customisable ability system and Limit Break attacks, the combat in *FFVII* always feels fresh

Side hustles

The best of Final Fantasy VII's extra tasks and minigames

Chocobos

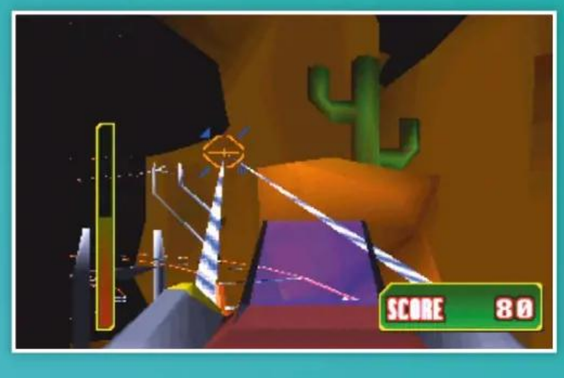
Catching them, riding them, racing them and breeding them – the Chocobo element is a game in itself, and becomes bewilderingly complex when you're looking to breed the Gold Chocobo, which can reach areas that even the Highwind cannot.

Snowboarding

On the second disc, Cloud gets the opportunity to snowboard down a mountain. Later in the game, it re-emerges as a tricky arcade game at Gold Saucer's Wonder Square. This minigame was popular enough to justify a mobile spin-off in Japan.

First-person shooting

Visiting the 'Speed' part of Gold Saucer triggers this bizarre but quite impressive first-person shooter section, where hitting a high score lands you a prize. This is notable for its kaleidoscopic visuals, in stark contrast to much of the game.



Battle on Fort Condor

Visiting Fort Condor triggers this intriguing little strategy offshoot, where you fund small skirmishes to hold back Shinra forces from the giant bird perched atop the fort. It's no *Age Of Empires*, but it shows how diverse the ideas are in *FFVII*.

Motorcycle chase

One of the nicest surprises early on is an action-packed minigame where you have to protect your comrades from Shinra soldiers on bikes by ramming them off the road with Cloud's inexplicably large Buster Sword. It's great fun.

Battle arena

The only way to get Cloud's Omnislash Limit Break outside of the finale, and a clever means of extending the combat's appeal, the battle arena on Gold Saucer is a relentless challenge where you have to survive successive rounds of enemies and status ailments.

From Barret to Cid, the amazing cast of characters proved popular with gamers everywhere

When it came to setting and story, *Final Fantasy VII* would similarly be a departure from series convention. While the previous entry in the series had a pronounced steampunk theme, the set of environments in the seventh game would vary massively from continent to continent, from a vast, polluted metropolis to backwater towns; that clash of futuristic technology against these remnants of a beautiful old world.

"We made it our objective to combine smooth action sequences with CG movies at a high level"

We asked Kitase to discuss the inspirations for the planet's creation, and he graciously passed our questions on to *Final Fantasy VII*'s art director, Yusuke Naora. "Initially, we wanted to try something new by having a corporation as the major enemy while still keeping the game broadly in the fantasy genre," he explains, referring to the Shinra Electric Power Company. "Having decided on this concept, we actively included many steampunk-like elements to try to merge the appeal of traditional high-fantasy 'brick-built' structures and sci-fi elements at a high level. However, as there was to be magic present in this world, it would have been hard to have cyberpunk-esque unknown future technology sitting comfortably with the other influences, so we tried to keep that aspect down as much as possible."

Naora continues: "On the design side, we were also very much inspired to mix in things from many different periods in a semi-chaotic manner, including things from our everyday lives such as the newer buildings in Tokyo, the streets of Ginza, and the Shibuya station building." All this led to a laudably diverse set of environments, which still felt like a cohesive part of the same world.

The setting was closely connected to the narrative – the backdrop of *Final Fantasy VII*'s story is that the planet is suffering, being drained of resources by the ruthless Shinra, which is also a prominent military force. Yet the central conflict of the story is actually smaller-scale than that. For the developers, it was more about the symbiotic struggle between the hero, Cloud, and the mysterious, seemingly out-of-reach villain, Sephiroth, that drove the game forward, as Kitase explains: "Throughout the story, I really wanted to depict Sephiroth as an overwhelmingly powerful threat. However, if you have a villain as an actual opponent who appears before the heroes then however strong or charismatic you make the character, he will still feel very much 'life-sized' and limited in scope, reduced to another minor evil."

What source of inspiration helped the team tackle this issue? You'd be surprised. Kitase continues: "To solve this problem, I decided to present Sephiroth indirectly, making the player aware of his existence through hints and stories but not having him show himself before them much. The player sees the aftermath of his ruthless deeds but does not arrive at the source of the evil for a long time. This was the same method used by Steven Spielberg in the film *Jaws*. Finding the butchered President Shinra on the top floor of the Shinra building and the impaled body of the Midgar Zolom are moments symbolic of this approach."

Players don't properly encounter Sephiroth until they're around ten hours in, and even then it's in fleeting glimpses – we see him often in flashbacks, leading to the revelation about his grim origins and subsequent breakdown. He, along with the attached musical theme, 'One-Winged Angel', would become iconic aspects of *FFVII* upon release. Cloud, the amnesiac hero trying to piece his distressing memories back together, was an equal point of fascination for players. It's this dynamic, with their subsequently explored history of bloodshed and trauma, that players hadn't seen before in *Final Fantasy*. "Furthermore, however far the player pursues him, Sephiroth is just out of reach, and because of this our image of him becomes more and more idolised and idealised," says Kitase. "This story structure also overlaps with the reasons that Cloud has such a complex about his own past, and I believe it is an effective tool for showing the relationship between the two characters."

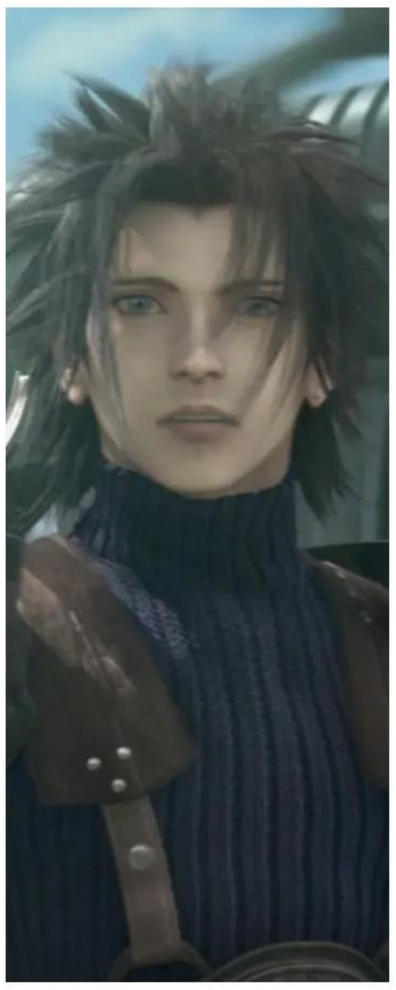
Final Fantasy VII's Materia system is so deep that it can eventually transform the entire rhythm of a battle, by letting you alter the conditions of it

Final Fantasy VII's unsung hero

Kitase weighs in on the high popularity of Zack Fair, Cloud's former mentor

As you may recall, the entire flashback sequence where Cloud remembers the events in Nibelheim that led to Sephiroth's transformation into a twisted enemy turns out to be a bit different. Later, we learn that Cloud confused himself with Zack, his superior in the army. Ever since then, Zack has remained a popular figure among *Final Fantasy* fans, which led to the spin-off *Crisis Core*. His role in Cloud's story makes him a unique element in *FFVII*'s tangled web.

"Zack is the vessel onto which Cloud twistedly projects his complexes towards SOLDIER [Shinra's elite fighting force]," Kitase tells us. "He was created by the scenario writer, [Kazushige Nojima], as he was trying to build up the mystery surrounding Cloud's past, and we did not originally think of Zack as a major character, but he seemed to be strangely popular with the fans. Much later on, Zack featured heavily in *Crisis Core*, and Mr Nojima was in charge of the scenario for both titles. When he first created Zack, I doubt that he could possibly have thought that we would be delving into the same character's story many years on!"



Constantin Jupp

Senior release producer, Media Molecule

"*Final Fantasy VII* made me realise that games were so much more than just running or shooting or fighting. Far from mindless entertainment, they could actually stir emotion within the player. It's the game that inspired me to join the games industry and help create those experiences for others."

All the character designs and their personalities were left in the hands of the designers, a break from previous games, where Sakaguchi would oversee their conception. This was also the first project where Tetsuya Nomura would be the sole character designer, who, having contributed work to *Final Fantasy V* and *Final Fantasy VI*, replaced Yoshitaka Amano from the previous titles. A *Famitsu* interview with Nomura (translated by Andriasang) explains that Cloud was essentially his creation, yet Kitase told us that determining both the looks and personalities of every one of *Final Fantasy VII*'s iconic cast of characters was "largely the responsibility of [Nomura]". It marked a sea change for the series. Gone were the primarily medieval, dreamlike heroes of Amano, and in came a fresh, exciting cast that would have an extensive impact on Japanese popular culture – not to mention birth a string of ideas that would be appropriated into character clichés, like spiky hair and giant swords. Amano would still contribute character sketches and the iconic meteor logo, however.

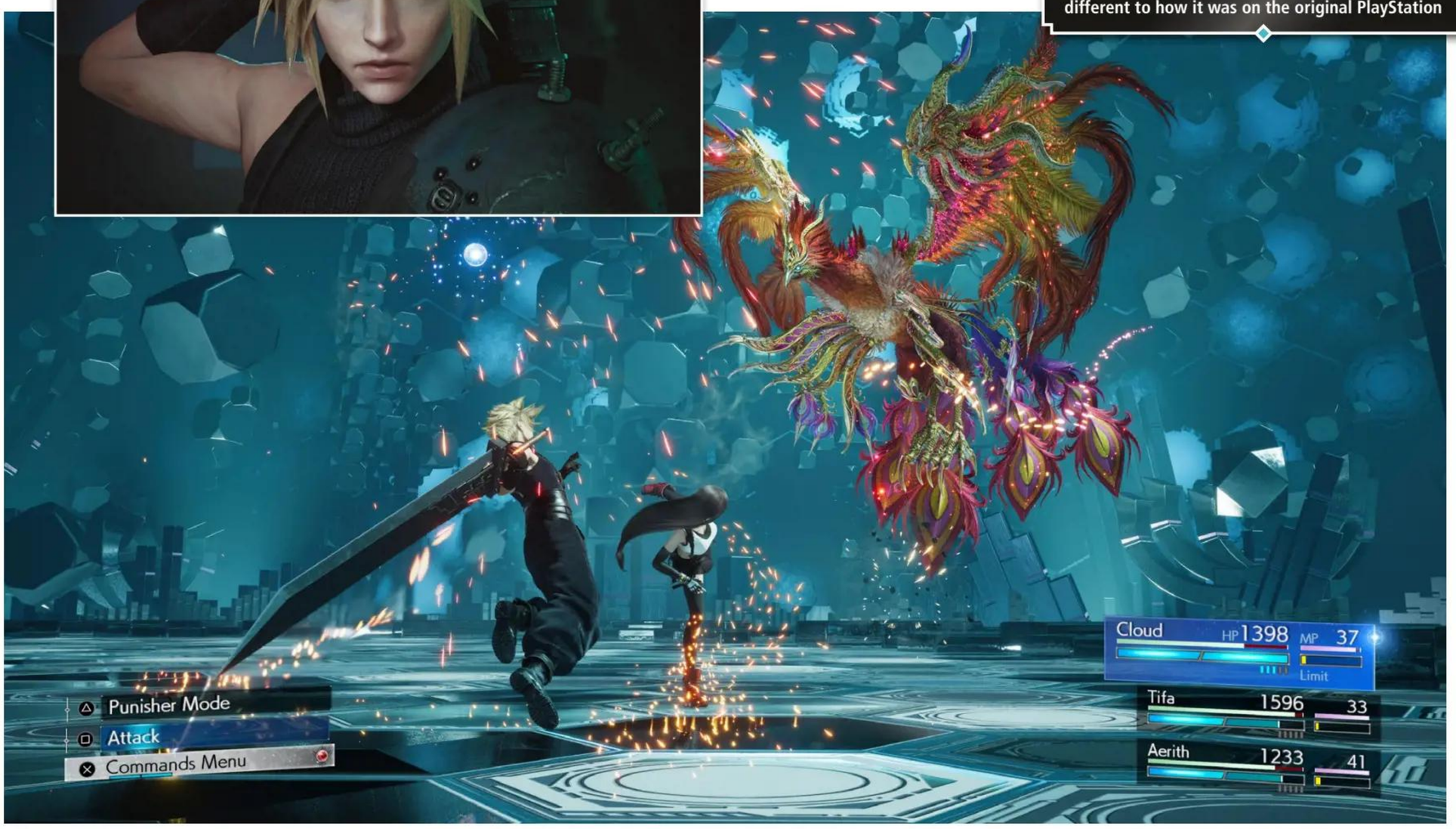
The immense backstories for these heroes and villains were fine-tuned by scenario writer Kazushige Nojima, while many of the actual narrative ideas came from a unique exercise that once again showed Square's experimental approach. "When designing the game, we asked all staff on the *Final Fantasy* team to submit possible episode ideas for character backstories and created the overall stories by putting these together," says Kitase. "It was the scenario writer, Mr Nojima, who managed to put together a complete and detailed story from this massive pool of ideas, a process that was much like putting together a jigsaw puzzle."

This exercise led to an intriguing collection of stories across the cast of heroes, with one main plot driving it all: the planet's impending destruction at the hands of Sephiroth, where he would harness the world's natural defences – known as the Lifestream – for himself. The cast of *Final Fantasy VII*, including the tortured, unfocused Barret; the last of an ancient race Aerith (or Aeris – a misspelling in the game's translation, as you probably know); and down-and-out pilot Cid Highwind; as well as more esoteric faces like the tomb-dwelling, optional companion Vincent Valentine, struck a chord with gamers, as their stories dovetailed skilfully with the main narrative.

These small tales, even Sephiroth's, traced back to the all-encompassing Shinra plot device – the corporation draining the planet of its resources. Given that *Final Fantasy VII* was made in the mid-Nineties, you could draw obvious parallels with the real-world environmental issues at that time. Yet environmentalism, surprisingly, was not part of the team's storytelling agenda, Kitase explains: "We did not particularly plan on bringing out environmental destruction as a major theme of the game but rather intended the story to depict the internal struggles of Cloud and Sephiroth.

"However, if pushed I would say that this theme was not so much that of concern over destruction of the environment but more about how we wanted to show how civilisation and the environment coexist. Cloud and his companions first appear in the game as a group trying to take down the Mako reactors, but in the end, we see them getting help from the Lifestream which is the source of that energy, and going forward into a future of coexistence with the planet. I believe that this theme of how we can strike a balance and live in harmony with the environment is one that is shared by all of us."

Cloud Strife as he appears in the much-recommended remake of *Final Fantasy VII*



Final Fantasy VII Remake's combat is massively different to how it was on the original PlayStation

The Lifestream is the literal embodiment of the planet's energy, where all life emerges from and where it returns to with death. Its genesis came from Sakaguchi, who had come up with the idea as a reaction to tragic events in his own life. "When we were creating *Final Fantasy III*, my mother passed away," he said in a video to coincide with *Final Fantasy VII*'s release. "And ever since, I have been thinking about the theme of life. Life exists in many things, and I was curious about what would happen if I attempted to examine life in a mathematical and logical way; maybe this was my approach in overcoming the grief I was experiencing."

With that delicate balance in mind, an antagonistic force like Shinra seemed suitable – it also presented a fine opportunity to go against the curve of the last six games. "We had a feeling that ideas for villains in RPGs had kind of become stale and repetitive, with it always being something like a massive dragon or an evil ruler who had acquired an ancient power," says Kitase. "When we asked ourselves what a more modern take on a powerful evil would be, we came up with the idea of a corporation that pollutes the environment for excessive profit."

The most talked-about moment in this complex tale, though, would be the death of a major character. One of the conditions of running our exclusive interview from Square Enix was that we wouldn't reveal this character's name – but you know which one we're talking about. Everyone knows it. You might have spent hours training this character up before the event occurred. It didn't matter. This character was wiped out of the story. Such a brave decision would be the defining moment, and it stunned this new generation of JRPG fans and is still the subject of much conversation today.

It is odd that Square Enix declined to comment on the sequence, having done so in the past – even Kitase himself, back in 2003. It could be that the company is hoping new gamers discover *Final Fantasy VII* and is hoping to safeguard that twist for maximum emotional impact. Whatever the reason, that moment was designed by Square to create a sudden void in the player, to make them think they'd have acted differently were they to know it was coming.

There are more surprises besides, though. A major plot point some way into the game sees the threat level raised significantly as giant creatures, a super-boss motif of the series known as Weapons, march into the overworld and heighten the drama of the closing act. The Emerald and Ruby Weapons are especially tough to beat, yet incorporating these powerful entities as part of the Sephiroth storyline imbued them with a new importance. Kitase explains why the team opted to do this: "In all *Final Fantasy* games, we always put in very powerful monsters in the latter parts of the game to challenge dedicated players and to deepen the gameplay experience, enhancing the longevity of the title and giving something to do aside from the main quest. We had already got the concept of the Weapons as defenders of the planet for *Final Fantasy VII* and so decided to tie that together with these play-enhancing features."

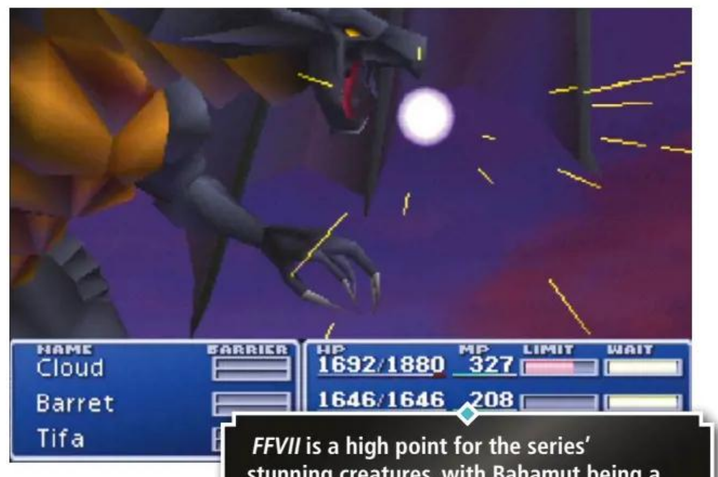
> "Sephiroth is always just out of reach, and so our image of him becomes more and more idolised"

But the story, despite forever being the guiding light for the *Final Fantasy* series, was matched by *Final Fantasy VII*'s immense technical and mechanical advances. Creating a masterpiece of this calibre, with such scope in setting and the jaw-dropping amount of iconography that would define Japanese RPGs from there on, was the product of a talented group of people, sharing a potent creative culture. We asked Kitase about the team's dynamic at the time.

"Before *FFVII*, we only really had 2D pixel art designers, but for this project many 3D CG specialists and designers came in from outside the company, leading to an interaction of various working cultures that was very stimulating," he says. "All the in-house designers also started to learn to use CG tools, and we held a lot of seminars and explanation meetings. I received instruction in how to use Alias PowerAnimator, and around a tenth of all the character motions seen in the game's event scenes were actually created by me!"

The visuals in the original game marked a clear change from the earlier games in the series

Catching and breeding Chocobos is one of the true tests of *Final Fantasy VII*



FFVII is a high point for the series' stunning creatures, with Bahamut being a decent means of lazily dispatching enemies

Randy Pitchford

CEO, Gearbox Software

"Obviously, role-playing games were a huge influence on *Borderlands*. *Final Fantasy* offered many of the standards and tropes that are borrowed by many role-playing games of today. The engagement and motivation that comes from levelling up and the draw of collecting loot first became clear to all of us when we did such things with pencil-and-paper games. While many PC games applied these principles, *Final Fantasy* managed to capture the design in a most accessible way at a time when our controllers had only a D-pad and two buttons. The elegance of the *Final Fantasy* approach to role-playing has inspired a generation.

In fact, the very first videogame that my wife and I played together from beginning to end was the first *Final Fantasy* game on the NES. To this day, we have fond memories of that experience and an irrational loyalty to the franchise. I know that many people see *Final Fantasy VII* as the high-water mark for the series, but for me it was the earlier *Final Fantasy* games on the NES and Super Nintendo that have had the most impact.

What Happens Next...

Expanded FFVII adventures

Advent Children

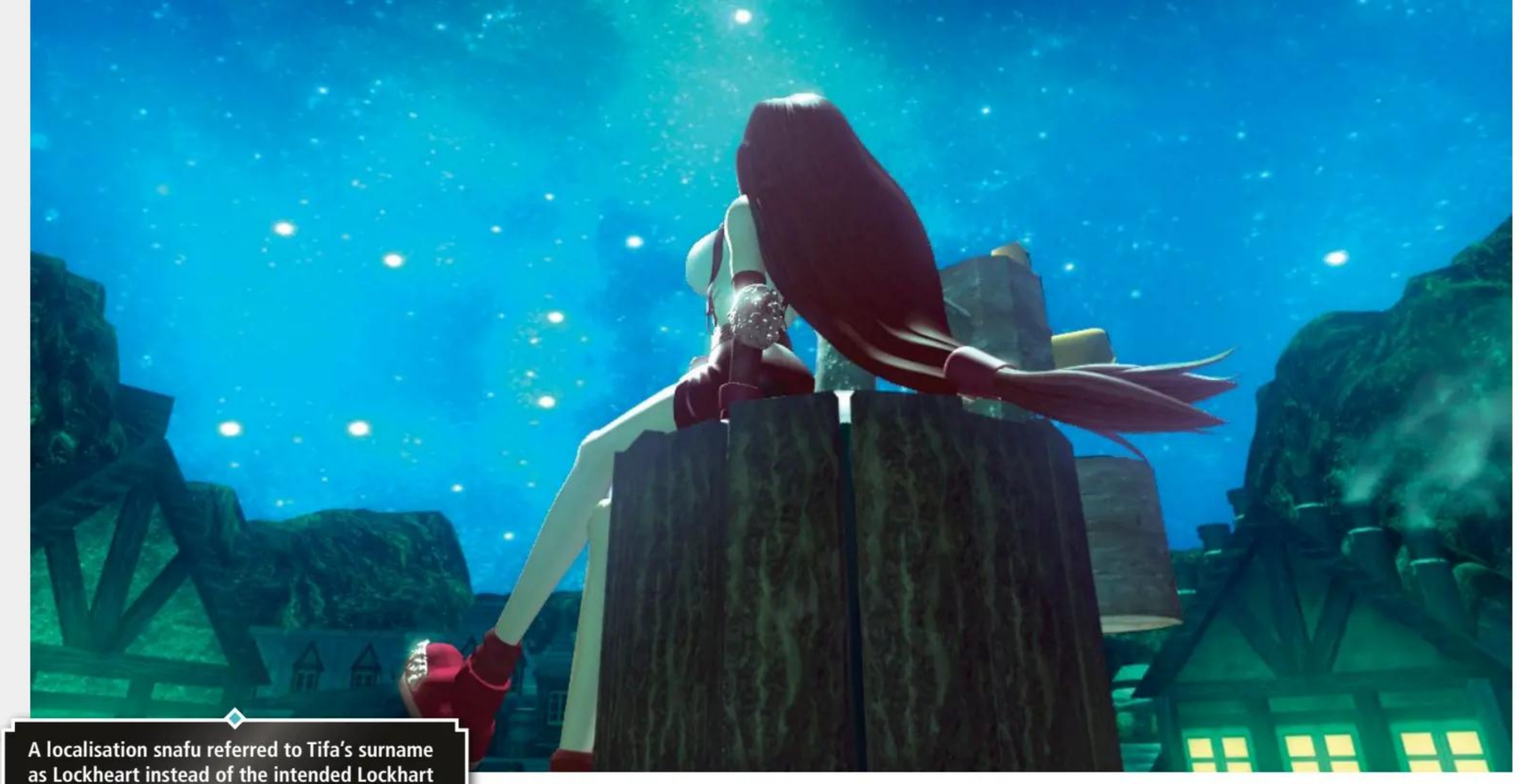
This cinematic direct follow-up to the *Final Fantasy VII* story hits and misses in equal measure. The action sequences are genuinely well-done and creative but the story quality nosedives when you realise it's all a big contrivance to resurrect Sephiroth and undermine the original adventure.

Crisis Core

This Zack Fair-starring prequel was one of the essential purchases of the PSP's library. Its action-oriented design proved ahead of its time, considering the direction future *Final Fantasy* titles have taken. Less popular was the inclusion of the character Genesis, a poetry-reciting edgelord played by the Japanese musician GACKT.

Dirge Of Cerberus

There's a universe where a Vincent Valentine-focused third-person shooter would have worked well. Sadly, it's not the one we live in. Despite the derision, *Dirge Of Cerberus* had a few high points, such as giving the villainous Professor Hojo more scenery to chew and shedding some more light on Vincent's origins.



A localisation snafu referred to Tifa's surname as Lockheart instead of the intended Lockhart

We had to ask Kitase if anything changed in development – and, as it happens, Square had a relatively airtight vision of *FFVII*, with only one change that fans will definitely have noticed. "The only thing that we had to change during development was the level of deformation on the characters. The fact that the characters are depicted at different levels of deformation in the field, battle and CG sections is a remnant of these changes." Whereas field characters ended up being blocky 3D models, the characters in battle had far more detail. As Kitase mentions, too, you can see this difference in CG movies – some depict the characters in blocky form, while others, like Sephiroth before the flames of Nibelheim, are more impressively realised. It's a curious inconsistency, but of course forgivable in the face of the finished product's other achievements.

The locations have aged better, thanks to the heavy use of prerendered backgrounds. Yet part of *Final Fantasy VII*'s appeal to long-time fans was the introduction of a fully 3D world map. Despite the cinematic touches present in other parts of the experience, the world map was seen as an updated version of the SNES overworld. "This part of the game was not actually all that much of a challenge," says Kitase. "It goes without saying that, at the time, creating data for a 3D map was hard work, but for better or worse we decided to do the map along pretty similar lines to a 2D world map from the *Final Fantasy* games of the Super Famicom era, so there were not a lot of problems with the overall vision."

Instead, the team had to spend more time worrying about the individual locations themselves, which were significantly more imaginative than their cartridge-based forebears. "It was actually a lot harder and took much more work realising the fully rendered backdrops for the towns and dungeons, as nothing like these had ever been done before at the time. Having said this, the world map in *Final Fantasy VII* did play a very important role in the game. After the first part, which is spent in the oppressive and cramped environment of Midgar, the feeling of liberation and freedom at the moment when you step out onto the world map is one of the game's most memorable highlights." That's completely true, and this was a stone's throw from making it into our list of favourite moments. *FFVII* progressively puts more power in the player's hands through the way they interact with the world.

Random battles would remain integral, but as directed by the SIGGRAPH presentation, the look of them marked an exciting leap in technology. "We had decided on the idea of battles in 3D, with the camera panning and zooming around the action, from before beginning development on *FFVII*. In 1995, we created a prototype game based on doing the battles from *FFVI* in 3D and showcased it at the SIGGRAPH convention that year. This test game was made with an eye to perfecting the idea for the battles in *FFVII*."

Aided by the straightforward yet endlessly customisable Materia-based ability system, as well as visually extravagant Limit Break attacks, the combat in *Final Fantasy VII* would never become a chore.

> "When thinking about a modern take on a powerful evil, we came up with the idea of a corporation"

This title also saw the best work of composer Nobuo Uematsu, building on his incredible music in *FFVI* with a series of stunning and highly memorable themes and leitmotifs. Any poignant, dark or pleasant instance is helped along enormously by his work, and he made an easy collaborator for Square. "We basically just showed Mr Uematsu the character designs and the scenario and had him familiarise with the overall themes and images of the game before letting him loose. There were no specific detailed requests, and he was allowed to create the score comparatively freely," says Kitase.

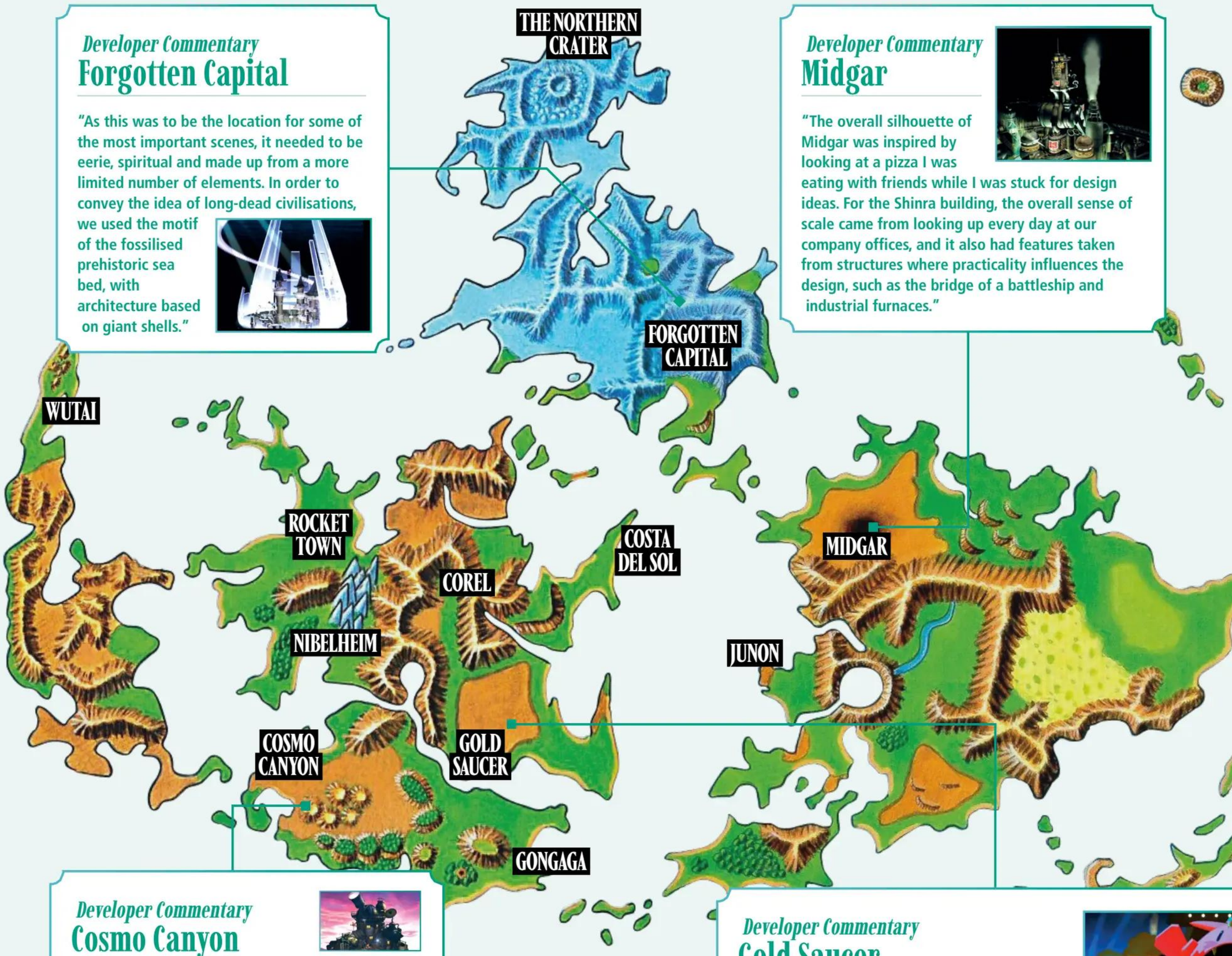
While HD technology and high-capacity storage media have let Square Enix realise the most elaborate of visions with *Final Fantasy*, there is something pure about the seventh game. It's such a well-rounded experience that it's obviously the product of a developer at a peak of creativity. Being the first *Final Fantasy* released in Europe, and armed with a slightly misleading marketing campaign that focused on FMVs over gameplay, it turned a historically marginalised genre into an international phenomenon.

Final Fantasy VII's appeal was so widely adopted that fans and curious outsiders petitioned Square Enix for it to receive the remake treatment. This campaign lasted over a decade, and in 2020 fans finally got what they desired... well, part of it at least, as this reinterpretation is coming in instalments.

So far, the two entries in the *FFVII* remake trilogy take us up to the tragic events at the City Of The Ancients, with the planned finale taking up the unenviable task of wrapping up the rest of the plot. It's a remarkable showing, presenting the classic story with full voice acting and cinematic flair. That's not all, though, as the battle system has been expertly rewired to accommodate an action-oriented style of play. Plus, there's discussion on whether this is actually a remake; there are instances where characters – particularly Sephiroth and Aerith – seem to know what the road of fate has in store for them. Plus, with the inclusion of parallel realities, what twists are the team planning for the finale, exactly? Tantalising questions aside, this remake is an exciting interpretation of the *FFVII* canon worth following to its climax.

This Planet As My Vessel

With insight from Final Fantasy VII's art director, Yusuke Naora, we pick out key locations from the story



Developer Commentary
Forgotten Capital

"As this was to be the location for some of the most important scenes, it needed to be eerie, spiritual and made up from a more limited number of elements. In order to convey the idea of long-dead civilisations, we used the motif of the fossilised prehistoric sea bed, with architecture based on giant shells."

Developer Commentary
Midgar

"The overall silhouette of Midgar was inspired by looking at a pizza I was eating with friends while I was stuck for design ideas. For the Shinra building, the overall sense of scale came from looking up every day at our company offices, and it also had features taken from structures where practicality influences the design, such as the bridge of a battleship and industrial furnaces."

Developer Commentary
Cosmo Canyon

"The concept of this area had been finalised as a valley and observatory like the Grand Canyon, so I had the designers put in more of a medieval feel, with fantasy elements such as the clockwork 'cosmic spheres' planetarium and the gyroscope compass."

Developer Commentary
Gold Saucer

"As there were a lot of minigames in the title, I set the question of, 'What would an amusement park in this world be like?' and made sure everyone had fun when designing this area."

Junon

A port town that is also a military base, Junon is attacked later on by Sapphire Weapon, where the ceremonious Junon cannon takes it down.

The Northern Crater

This is where Jenova landed about 2,000 years before the start of the story – a creepy, expansive abyss where the climax of the game takes place.

Nibelheim

As more observant players will know, after Nibelheim was burnt down by Sephiroth, the entire town was rebuilt by Shinra and the citizens were replaced with its employees in a cover-up.

Costa Del Sol

An utterly bizarre, Spanish-style holiday town with a relaxed atmosphere, players could later buy an overpriced house in this pleasantly different part of the world map.

Gongaga

This sad little town is the location of an exploded Mako reactor, with the citizens mourning their dead. Like a sister town of Nibelheim, in a strange way.

Wutai

A more culturally differentiated locale than everywhere else, Wutai is the sole town on the far western continent and marks the only location where the heroes team up with the Turks.

Corel

Barret's hometown turned post-Shinra-wreck, this is where you can catch the lift to the far more jolly Gold Saucer. There's a ruddy superb chase sequence here later in the game, too.

Rocket Town

Built around a launchpad, this is where one of the more interesting characters, foul-mouthed pilot Cid Highwind, hails from. It's a cheerful moment when you finally get the rocket into space.

FINAL FANTASY VII

REVOLUTION AND EVOLUTION

After a huge breakout hit, Hironobu Sakaguchi and the Final Fantasy creative team looked to reinvent the series and honour its past

How do you follow up one of the most ambitious and successful games ever made? Well, if you're Hironobu Sakaguchi and the *Final Fantasy* creative team, you throw out basically everything except the game engines and start over from scratch.

Final Fantasy has an apocryphal reputation for reinventing itself with every new entry, and while that's been true for a while now, the series was far more iterative during its 16-bit days, where the core elements of gameplay and presentation remained consistent across titles. *Final Fantasy VII* was the series' breakout hit, but outside of its futuristic setting and new pre-rendered backgrounds, its DNA and game systems were heavily influenced by the games that came before.

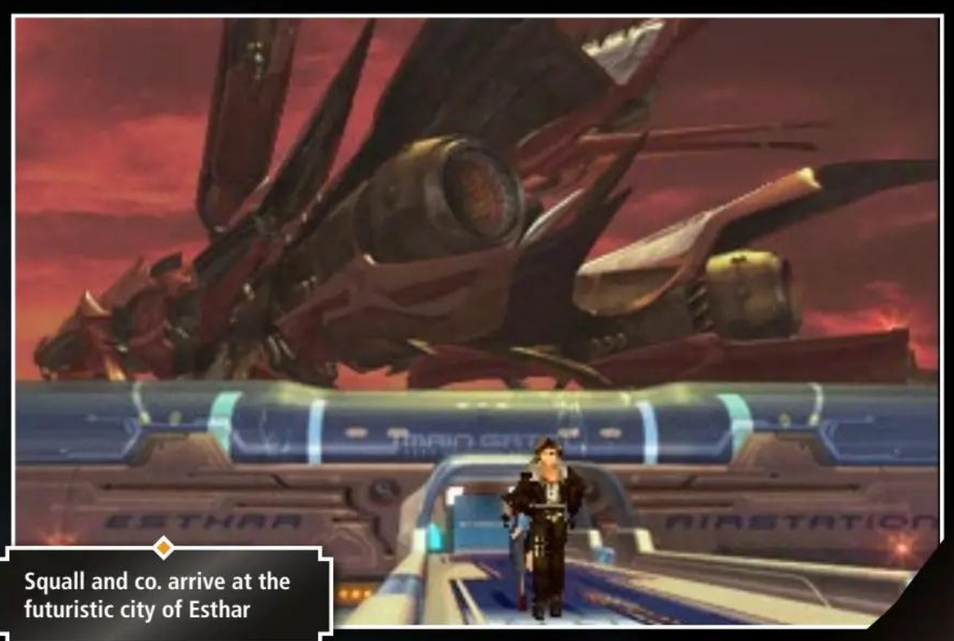
But with *Final Fantasy VII* under their belt, Sakaguchi's sophomore effort on Sony's new console eagerly started exploring new design space to go along with its highly praised visual overhaul. Sakaguchi followed up his megahit with one of the series' most inventive games, closing out the console generation with a culmination of everything that came before. Revolution and evolution, all in the span of three years.

Alone in space, Squall and Rinoa wonder how long they can hold their breath

Revolution: Final Fantasy VIII

Since the very beginning, science fiction has been a part of Hironobu Sakaguchi's vision for *Final Fantasy*, with elements of time travel and rogue mechs, for instance, separating *Final Fantasy* from Yuji Horii's purely fantasy-driven *Dragon Quest* when they released in the '80s. As the series progressed, light science-fiction elements would find their way into various games, with *Final Fantasy VI*'s steampunk aesthetic and Magitek Knights kicking off an overt blending of science fiction and fantasy that felt fresh and exciting for a genre rooted in Dungeons & Dragons tropes.

Final Fantasy VII's neon-soaked, capitalist hellscape, the city of Midgar, was unquestionably inspired by the dystopian, cyberpunk visions of William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* and Paul Verhoeven's *Total Recall*, and its themes of environmentalism and anti-capitalism explored tension between Tolkien-esque fantasy and cyberpunk's excoriation of nihilistic technological advancement. But instead of continuing through the grimy dystopia of its



Squall and co. arrive at the futuristic city of Esthar

The Ochu might be giant, but it doesn't stand a chance against a party kitted out in the best Guardian Forces on offer

prequels, *Final Fantasy VIII*, released just two years after *VII*, leaned into a vibrant and colourful *Star Trek*-esque utopia. Slick and beyond modern, *Final Fantasy VIII*'s world blended smooth, natural environments with glitzy and glamorous urban environments full of jazz bars, bright lights and open skies. This abrupt shift from the previous games' grim environments provided the perfect canvas to tell a new type of story, exploring how we reckon with past traumas and learn how to step positively into the future. It's not so much about how to save the world, but how to save ourselves.

Opening at an elite military school called Balamb Garden, *Final Fantasy VIII* tells a story about the weaponisation of utopia, time-travelling witches, child soldiers, mass amnesia, space travel, hot-dog-eating contests and... honestly, it's hard to concisely boil down. But at its very core, *Final Fantasy VIII* is a love story.

In a 1998 interview, director Yoshinori Kitase explained the idea was to tell a story tightly focused on two characters: dual protagonists Squall Leonhart and Rinoa Heartilly. "Up to now, *Final Fantasy* games have featured large ensemble casts and a story balanced between the different characters, who each have their own individual dramas," he said. "But this time, we were serious about using the sub-characters specifically to prop up the story of the hero and heroine."

> "Going back to the fantasy-like world was probably a bold step by us"
>
> **Kazuhiko Aoki**

Expanded from three CDs to four, immediate impressions of *Final Fantasy VIII* reveal a creative team confident with the tools they've been handed. While *FFVII* wowed by introducing the series to the concept of 3D characters on highly detailed backgrounds, it always felt a little inconsistent and rough around the edges as its creative and technical teams came to understand what the PlayStation – and they – could produce. Powered by that experience, *Final Fantasy VIII* is a polished evolution of *VII*'s formula, marking a major leap forward graphically for the series with taller, organically proportioned characters, frequent use of full-motion video in scene backgrounds and cutscenes and a new, higher fidelity approach to sampling and composing music. In many ways, it feels like as big a technological leap as *Final Fantasy III* to *Final Fantasy IV*, without the benefit of a new console.

For all its innovations and improvements, *Final Fantasy VIII* is among the series' most divisive entries. The strange plot takes a back seat to many of the game's dramatic system changes, which introduce the Guardian Force (GF), Junction and Draw systems to a series that, to that point, had included linear character growth mechanics. Players could equip each character with GFs, ostensibly *Final Fantasy VIII*'s take on the series' long-standing summon system, and those GFs would then allow the player to 'Junction' spells, which they've 'drawn' from the environment and enemies, to different combat stats. This creates a unique tension between hoarding and utilising resources. Do you use your powerful spells in battle, doing major damage, but weaken your character in the process?

The Guardian Force Bahamut breaks through the clouds before raining terror down on his enemies

The devil's in the details

Sometimes it's the little things that count

CD-quality music

While composer Nobuo Uematsu's *Final Fantasy* soundtracks are some of the most beloved in the genre, his experience hearing Miki Higashino's diverse and lush score for *Suikoden* inspired him to up his game for *Final Fantasy VIII*'s soundtrack. While this produced longer load times, the CD-quality audio is a standout.

Squall is... dead?

Final Fantasy VII might feature one of gaming's most famous deaths, but did you know that a dedicated group of fans believes *Final Fantasy VIII*'s hero Squall Leonhart dies during disc one's climax? Conceived by a fan named 'duckroll' and expanded into a full website by Rahul Choudhury and Diedra Rater, this conspiracy theory just won't go away.

Active Time Events

While *Final Fantasy IX*'s terrific item-based character growth system is rightfully lauded, perhaps its greatest addition to the series is the Active Time Encounter (ATE) system. Throughout the game, players are presented with optional ATE scenes that follow their party members through entertaining vignettes that show personal growth and conflict.

FFIX... Remake?

Final Fantasy VII fans clamoured for a remake of their beloved game, and what they finally got 15 years later was a revelation. So it's no surprise that *Final Fantasy IX* fans hope for something similar. Though a remake has been rumoured for years, there's nothing concrete yet. Fortunately, fan-made projects like Moguri Mod exist to ease the pain.

Excalibur II

The *Final Fantasy* series is full of fun side quests, but few of them are as demanding – and rewarding – as *Final Fantasy IX*'s rigorous trial to obtain Steiner's ultimate weapon: Excalibur II. A normal playthrough might take you 50 hours, but to lay hands on the mystical sword, you must reach the final dungeon in under 12 hours.

☞ It's a love-it-or-hate-it kind of system, but *Final Fantasy VIII* is a love-it-or-hate-it game, and one of the first examples of the series showing a willingness to divest itself of past successes in the pursuit of new ideas.

Evolution: Final Fantasy IX

So, after going from steampunk to cyberpunk to utopiapunk, naturally, *Final Fantasy* was going to keep reaching deeper into the science fiction genre for inspiration, right? Maybe some space opera? After all, we've travelled to space in at least two previous titles... not so fast.

Announced in January 2000 alongside *Final Fantasy X* and *Final Fantasy XI*, *Final Fantasy IX* surprised fans and the media alike with a bold new visual style and a return to the series' high-fantasy roots. Well, it surprised most fans and media, except those paying close attention to a series of leaks unprecedented for the series almost a year earlier. In early 1999, a gaming site run by Andrew Vestal, called the Gaming Intelligence Agency, leaked details about *Final Fantasy IX* well before its official reveal. "*Final Fantasy IX* [will look] nothing like the realistic *VII* and *VIII*," they reported, based on details from a trusted source. Instead, it was "all about hobbits," referring to the game's eventual abstract chibi design for its characters.

"The biggest surprise for me regarding *Final Fantasy IX* was the change in the overall look of the game," reported IGN's Dave Zdyrko in response to Square's high-profile Millennium Event, where the new games were announced. "While *FFVII* and *FFVIII* had a distinct, futuristic cyber-look to them, *Final Fantasy IX*, with Yoshitaka Amano returning, has more of a fantasy, swords-and-sorcery-type appeal."

"Going back to the fantasy-like world was probably a bold step by us, but after actually going through the process of creating the game, the characters that are non-realistic actually make you feel more familiar with them after you go through the game," explained designer Kazuhiko Aoki in an interview. "As long as the users can still sympathise with the characters – we believe that this is the case – we feel that it's what's needed."

Eschewing neon signs and automobiles completely, *FFIX* is a story of thieves and rebellious princesses, knights and wizards and derring-do. Set in an unabashedly fantasy world, *Final Fantasy IX*'s vibe and art design are inspired and technically impressive – a huge step up, again, from what Square pulled off in *FFVIII*, and a true showcase of what the aging PlayStation was capable of.

Its cute, chibi-fied characters are sometimes divisive, but coupled with its lush world and unforgettable soundtrack, they feel like a respectful modernisation of the series' original pixel art aesthetic – a perfect blend of abstraction and detail, augmented by the creative team's understanding of how CRT televisions helped blend the polygonal character models with the playful, animated pre-rendered backgrounds.

Underpinning *Final Fantasy IX*'s beloved reputation isn't just its return to series roots, but its stake in a small, compelling cast of characters that at once play into stereotypes and break them down. Ranking among the best videogame openings of all time, *Final Fantasy IX*'s first hour is a masterclass in character introductions, worldbuilding and stakes.

Poor little Vivi just wanted to watch the play

Final Fantasy IX's cast of supporting characters, led by Beatrix, is deep and memorable

Final Fantasy IX's combat system is beautiful… and slow as molasses

Dragoon Freya confronts her tragic past

"I see *FFIX* as bracketing, or bringing to a close, this era of *Final Fantasy*," said producer and series creator Hironobu Sakaguchi in a July 2000 interview with *Hyper PlayStation* magazine. After two previous PlayStation titles, Square was no longer "struggling to squeeze every last drop of performance out of the hardware," and could instead "focus on building a world and atmosphere that really feels like *Final Fantasy*."

Final Fantasy IX opens on the Prima Vista airship belonging to the Tantalus Theatre Troupe, whose performance in the city of Alexandria is a clever ploy to kidnap Princess Garnet Til Alexandros XVII. The kidnapping takes a turn, however, when Garnet, fleeing her evil mother, Queen Brahne, reveals herself eager to be kidnapped. Watching all this is the shy and gullible Black Mage Vivi Ornitier, who quickly – and against his will – becomes caught up in the plot and flees with the Tantalus thieves before their airship crashes in the Evil Forest, kicking off a conflict that will change, and save, the world.

Among its many virtues, Vivi is perhaps *Final Fantasy IX*'s crowning achievement. "What makes Vivi so fascinating is how his story is a twist on the typical coming-of-age tale, exploring the moment so many people face where the veil of the world is lifted — where you learn about the reality of the world, and how your adolescent brain's interpretation of how things worked, simply isn't the case," explained Inverse's Hayes Madsen in an article titled 'Final Fantasy 9's Most Misunderstood Character Is Also The Franchise's Most Enduring'.

Beginning the story as a shy, clumsy little guy, Vivi's journey is one of self-discovery, heartbreakingly exploring themes of self-acceptance and identity, asking the player to think through, deeply, what it means to pursue self-actualisation above whatever fate has in store for you. Vivi, like *Final Fantasy IX* as a whole, confronts you with tropes and ideas you thought you understood, and then asks you to reconsider everything you've been taught. For this reason, it's among *Final Fantasy*'s most enduring and beloved stories.

Made in America

The king of Japanese RPGs was made… in America?

When Hironobu Sakaguchi's *Final Fantasy* followed in the footsteps of Yuji Horii's *Dragon Quest*, together they helped create a new genre of role-playing game colloquially (and divisively) called Japanese RPGs. But, really, what's in a name, because *Final Fantasy*'s history is deeply tied to the American game development community. In fact, *Final Fantasy IX* was made in Hawaii – an experience that went on to inspire *Final Fantasy X*'s tropical setting.

Why Hawaii? Well, besides being beautiful, director Hiroyuki Itou said the islands' location made a lot of sense. "Many of our *FFIX* staff members come from overseas," Itou said. "Many of them have worked actively in Hollywood. Square has gained a major advantage from working with these highly skilled individuals. Since it would be somewhat difficult for our overseas members to work in Japan, Hawaii was the ideal place for the team to work together."

Believe it or not, *Final Fantasy*'s American roots go back all the way to the second game in the series. When legendary game programmer Nasir Gebelli had work visa issues in Japan, he returned to his home in Sacramento, California. It was there that he completed a majority of his work on *Final Fantasy II* and *III*.

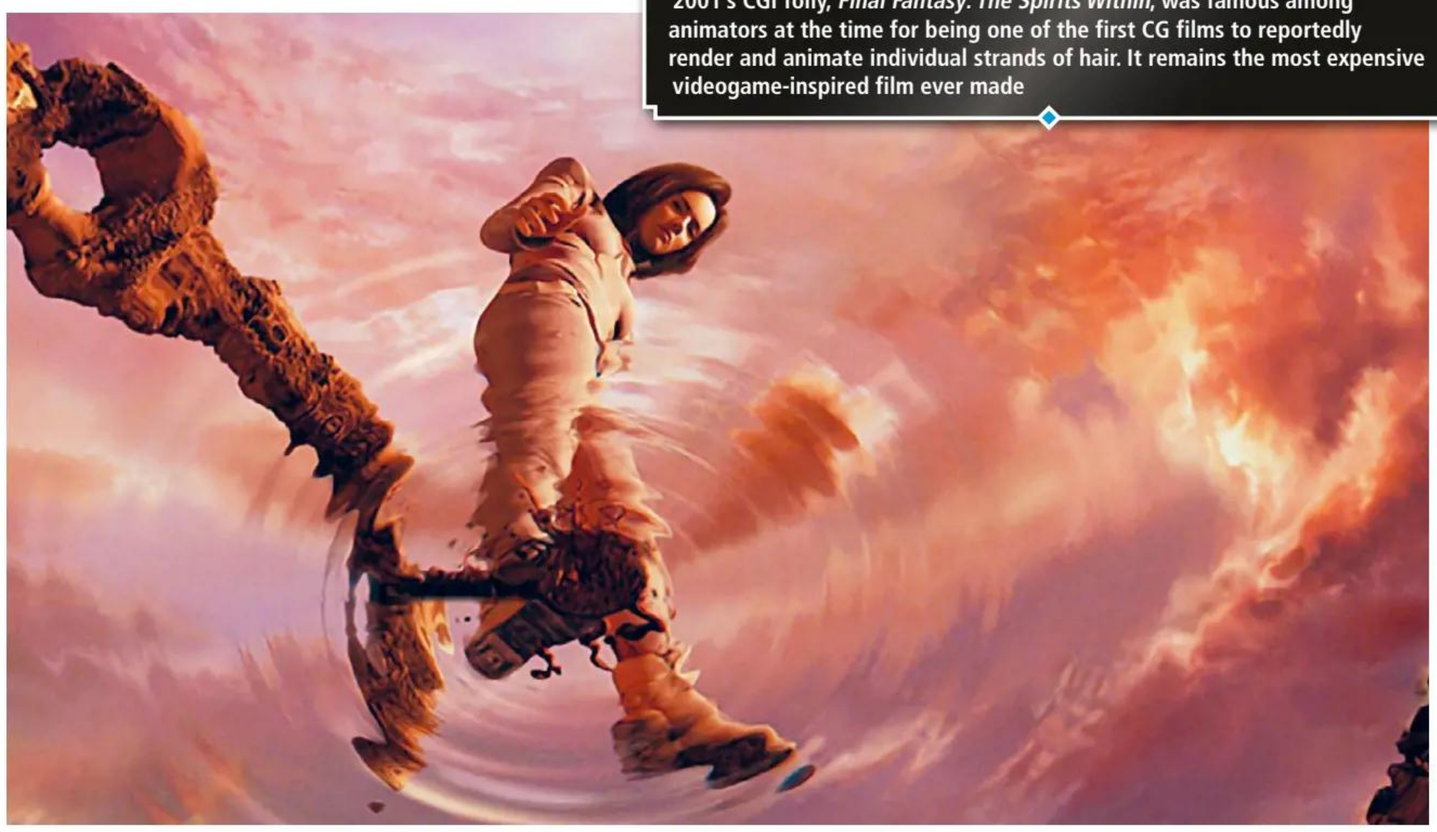
32-bit Adieu

Final Fantasy's PlayStation years were truly an era of revolution and evolution. *Final Fantasy VII* reset the bar, introducing the series to millions of new fans around the world with its cinematic approach to console RPGs, and *Final Fantasy VIII* and *IX* followed with performances that proved the formula wasn't just a flash in the pan. With each new game making technical leaps above its predecessors, *Final Fantasy*, for better or worse, found a new gear during its PlayStation era as it learned to let go of the past and reinvent itself in pursuit of new stories and new experiences.

With its 3D tech, accessible games and cinematic approach, the PlayStation revolutionised the games industry, and Hironobu Sakaguchi, once a young musician with dreams of being a rock star and making films, knew exactly how to take advantage.

CHAPTER V

End of an Era



2001's CGI folly, *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within*, was famous among animators at the time for being one of the first CG films to reportedly render and animate individual strands of hair. It remains the most expensive videogame-inspired film ever made

Hashimoto The trio of PlayStation games we made provided a high boost to the company. They enriched our lives: we moved to better offices in Meguro, we got new computers and lots more staff were joining. But Sakaguchi was always looking for what was going to be the next big thing. He came to strongly believe that an online revolution was coming. Because of that, we set up our PlayOnline project, a portal for online gaming. This was the impetus behind what would become the company's first MMO, *Final Fantasy XI*.

The actual development of *Final Fantasy XI* was handled in Honolulu in Sakaguchi's studio there. I spent my time running around Japan brokering deals to get smaller games onto the PlayOnline service, to help support *Final Fantasy XI*. There were so many projects on the go at that time. I think, at one point, *Final Fantasy IX*, *X*, *XI*, *XII* and the *Final Fantasy* film were all concurrently in development at the studio. It was an extremely hectic time. That's when I started hearing the rumours that Sakaguchi was going to leave the company.

Sakaguchi With *Final Fantasy VII* we had a huge number of CG experts join the company. We didn't train up the old Square staff, but instead gathered a very skilled team from across Japan. They made the cutscenes in PlayStation games. Now, these people weren't originally games guys; they were CG specialists, and their goals and dreams were to work in film. I had a feeling that, because we had this talent in the company, maybe we could make a film together. So I got together the team and some people from Hollywood and started looking at possibilities. We decided to make it in Hawaii because it's equidistant to Japan and North America. Also, the local Hawaiian government was supportive about getting visas. If you had tried to take 150 Japanese staff to Hollywood to work on a film project, you'd never get the visas. But everything started coming together, and I decided we should take a chance.

> "I had a feeling that maybe we could make a film together"
>
> **Hironobu Sakaguchi**

Kitase People look at *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within* and think it has little to do with the games. That's incorrect. While Nomura, Nojima and I wrote the plot for *Final Fantasy VII,* there was in fact an earlier script for the game that Sakaguchi had written by himself. Lots of the concepts from that document made it into the game, but the actual original plot formed the basis of the script for the movie. People look at the film and think it's pure sci-fi. But when I see the film, I can see a lot of the kind of things he wanted to do with *Final Fantasy VII*.

Sakaguchi The reason I decided to leave Square Enix was related to the film's performance, of course, but that's not the sole reason. From around *Final Fantasy VII* onwards I stopped being involved in the programming work and moved more into production and business management. My job continued moving in that direction and I started thinking that this wasn't the reason I joined the industry. So when the film project was such a

☞ massive failure it was a good chance for a reset that would allow me to get back to the things I wanted to do in the game industry.

Kitase As a business venture, yes, it was a failure, but as an entertainment company you have to try new things. You don't want to be a company that is so scared of failure that you never try anything new.

Hashimoto When I heard the rumours, I called Sakaguchi to ask whether it was true that he was leaving. I still remember when I first heard it from his lips. It was terrifying. The business had expanded so much in such a short time and I was hugely concerned that we were about to lose the guy at the top of it all. Initially the plan was that he would keep supporting Square as part of an outside company, which slightly put my mind at rest. But that didn't quite happen, and keeping stable with such changes happening became a huge challenge.

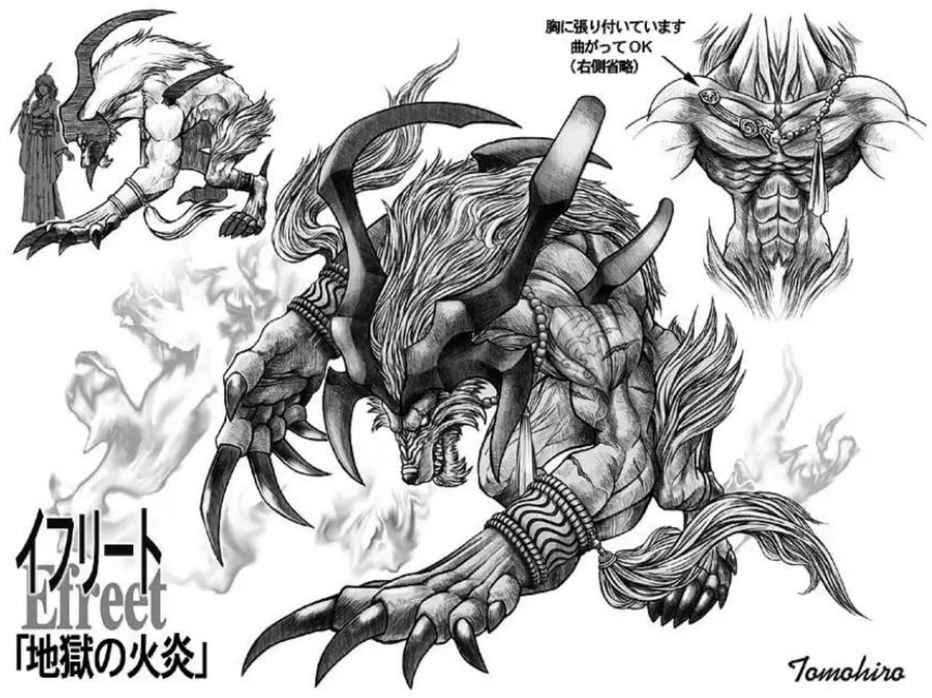
Kitase I've since heard, second hand, that Sakaguchi said that he handed responsibility for the *Final Fantasy* series over to me when he left. That's very flattering, of course, but at the time it wasn't as if there was an official parting speech or handover of the reins. In lots of ways Sakaguchi's departure was like Aerith's death in *Final Fantasy VII*. One day he just wasn't there any more.

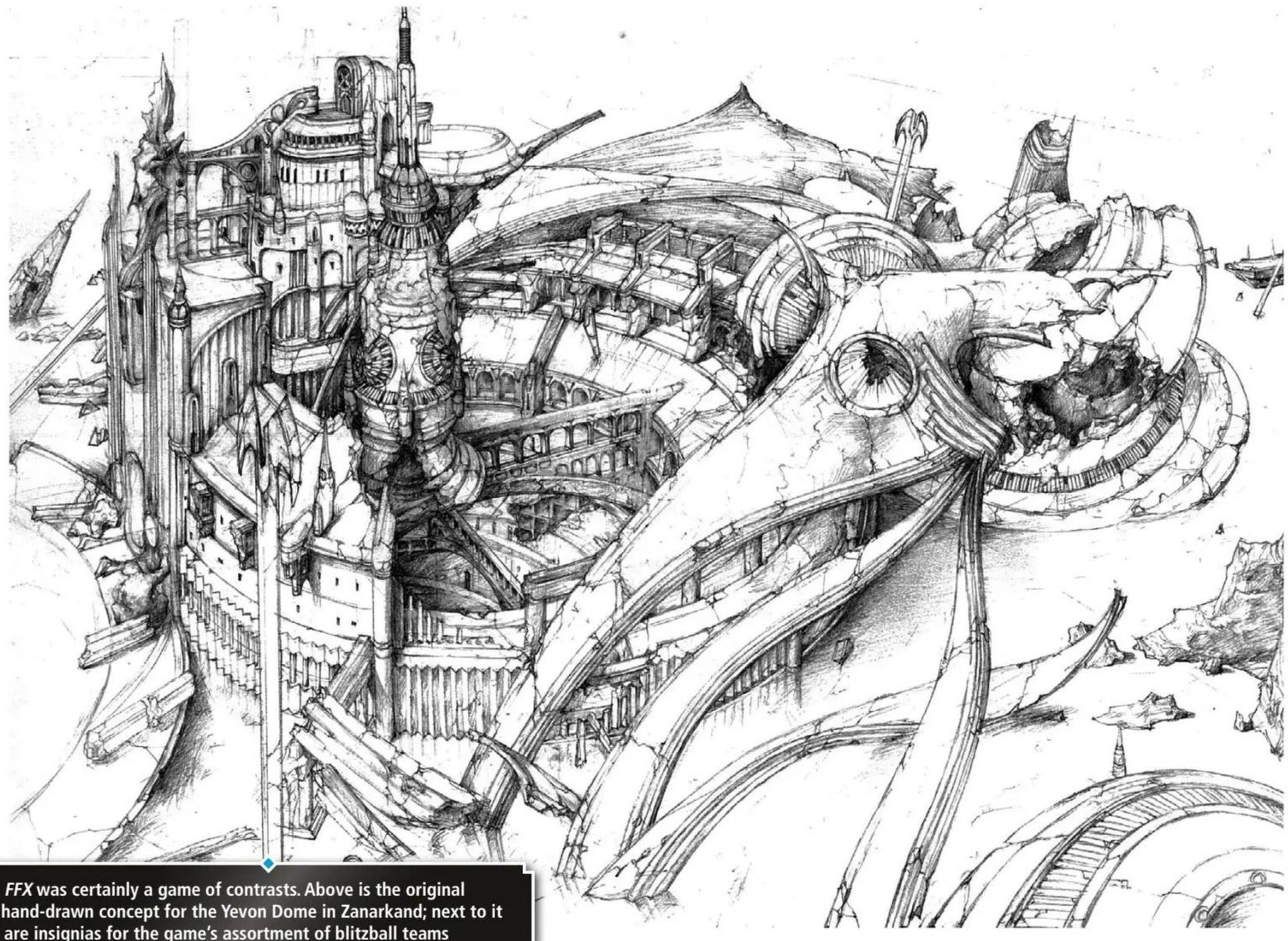
There wasn't really a period of grieving, but it was immediately obvious in his absence what a strong hand he had kept on the tiller, and the fact that he was a very strong leader, not just of *Final Fantasy* but of the entire company. There was a void there left by him, which we had to get used to.

> "Sakaguchi's departure was like Aerith's death. One day he just wasn't there any more"
>
> **Yoshinori Kitase**

Uematsu I continued to work at the company for about two years after Sakaguchi left. It wasn't so much out of a sense of loyalty to Square so much as the fact that, after Sakaguchi left, it started to get boring without him. Lots of people say lots of things about Mr Sakaguchi but, for me, he is like a kid: someone who is pure and honest and who follows what he finds interesting. He is wonderfully straightforward in that way.

While Sakaguchi was at Square Enix the company followed in that mould. We made games that we found interesting and exciting. That's what we chased. Sure, we had to think strategically from a business perspective, but after Sakaguchi left money seemed to become the highest priority. The first ☞





FFX was certainly a game of contrasts. Above is the original hand-drawn concept for the Yevon Dome in Zanarkand; next to it are insignias for the game's assortment of blitzball teams

Final Fantasy XI Online, released in mid-2002 in Japan, was the first MMORPG to offer cross-platform play between PC and PlayStation 2

Final Fantasy XI's players could customise their character across one of five races, choosing gender, face, hair colour, size, job, and national allegiance

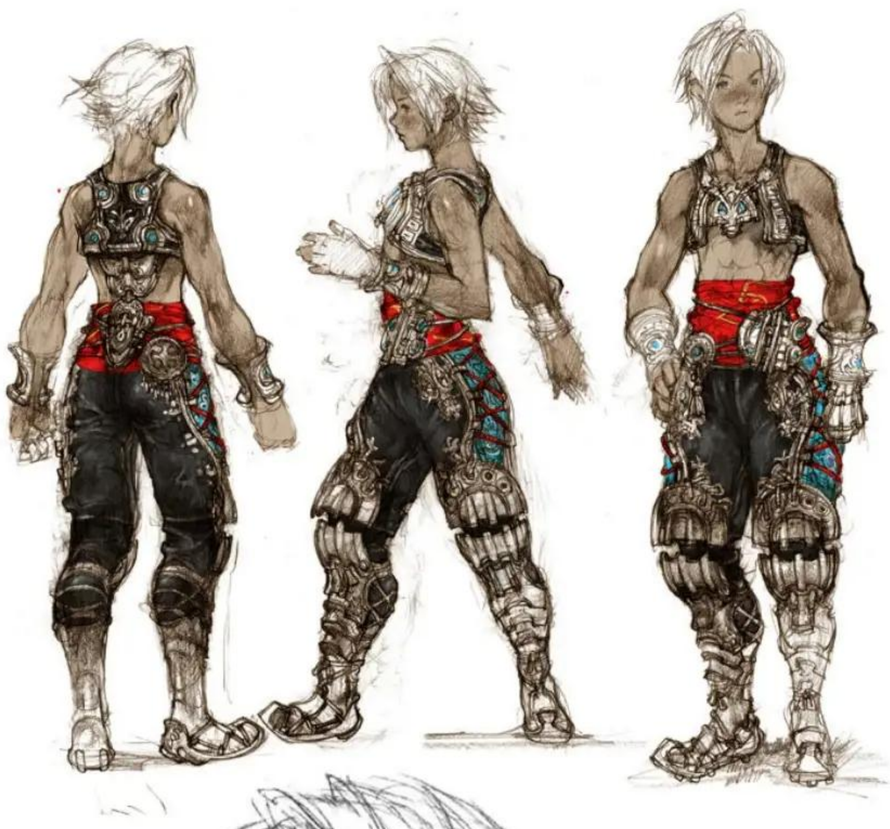
☞ question was always, "What will sell?" That attitude made me lose interest, a little.

Hashimoto I remember it wasn't just Sakaguchi who left. Lots of the higher-ups followed, which caused a lot of trouble for us in terms of how we were going to run the business. We didn't want to cause trouble for our fans and business partners. It was hugely worrying. How were we going to keep going? Money was also a problem. We had expanded too much, and our outgoings were so high, that money was very tight. We had to think carefully about which titles we were going to focus on. The early 2000s were a difficult time to get through.

Nomura It's not as if I consciously decided to stick around myself after Sakaguchi left. I am always handling multiple projects at once, so there is never a convenient time to pull out. Also, I'm aware that whenever I would hypothetically choose to leave the company it would cause trouble for somebody, and that has resulted in me staying, more than any conscious decision to do so.

Kitase As a product, I don't think *Final Fantasy XII*'s direction was influenced by the absence of Sakaguchi. But it's probably fair to say that with the changeover from PlayStation 2 to 3, we had to spend a lot of time building the basic engine. That took far longer than we had estimated. You needed a lot of staff assigned, and in order to do that we had to move people around in the company, and squash smaller games in order to get the staff together. Sakaguchi was very good at bringing a team together. He was very blunt and direct, but also very powerful in his ability to move people around to just the right place. If he had been in charge he would have got the development together in a much more efficient way.

Hashimoto We struggled as the technology was changing. We lacked the experience with PlayStation 3 and to be frank, our adoption of that machine was well behind the curve.



Final Fantasy XII's original director Yasumi Matsuno cast the older character Basch as the game's protagonist. This was later changed to promote the more youthful (and irritating) Vaan to the lead role

Chocobos have come a long way since *FFII*, when Amano drew them bald and ugly, in sharp contrast to these *FFX* beauties

Story continues on Pg72

FINAL FANTASY X

A new age for the series dawns as it enters the PlayStation 2 era and ventures online

Final Fantasy X was a turning point for the franchise. The series' three-game run on the PlayStation had been met with near-universal acclaim and international recognition. In 2001, *Final Fantasy X* would take this successful formula to the next level. The timing couldn't have been better. *Final Fantasy IX* had bid a fond farewell to the PlayStation era with references to many of the former games from the series. Now was the time to use the power of the PlayStation 2 for a new next-generation title.

The game opens with a stunning sequence as the advanced metropolis of Zanarkand comes under attack from a huge force known simply as Sin. Among the chaos, a young Blitzballer called Tidus and a mysterious man named Auron are transported to another world as the city is destroyed. Tidus wakes up in this new world of Spira alone, and will soon join an epic and emotional adventure along with the summoner, Yuna, and a host of other characters, to embark on a pilgrimage to destroy Sin.

Final Fantasy X boasted many series firsts. For the first time, voice actors were used for characters, evident from the very first moment where the narrator, Tidus, implores the player to "listen to my story. This may be our last chance." This mechanic adds a new layer of storytelling and gives all the player-characters and non-player characters (NPCs) alike stronger personalities. In fact, it is the first game of the series where the player is unable to name all the characters, and only Tidus' name can be changed.

This was also the first 3D *Final Fantasy*, the pre-rendered 2D backgrounds replaced with the tropical islands of Besaid and Kilika and the megacities of Zanarkand and Bevelle. The extra power of the PlayStation 2 resulted in a number of breathtaking scenes from the conflict between Sin and the Crusaders at Mushroom Rock Road, Blitzball in Luca, the Bevelle rescue and the tender moment between Tidus and Yuna in Macalania.

Improved graphics and voice acting make *Final Fantasy X* an intensely emotional game, with several tear-jerking moments and epic confrontations. This feeling is in no doubt enhanced by Spira itself, which fully absorbs and invests the player with its lush and lived-in locales with a number of NPCs and an abundance of lore. The first village, Besaid, and its beautiful theme song, instantly engrossed players with the world of Spira. This really felt like a living and breathing, yet struggling world.

The gameplay was revamped, too. The Active Time Battle system was replaced by a more tactical

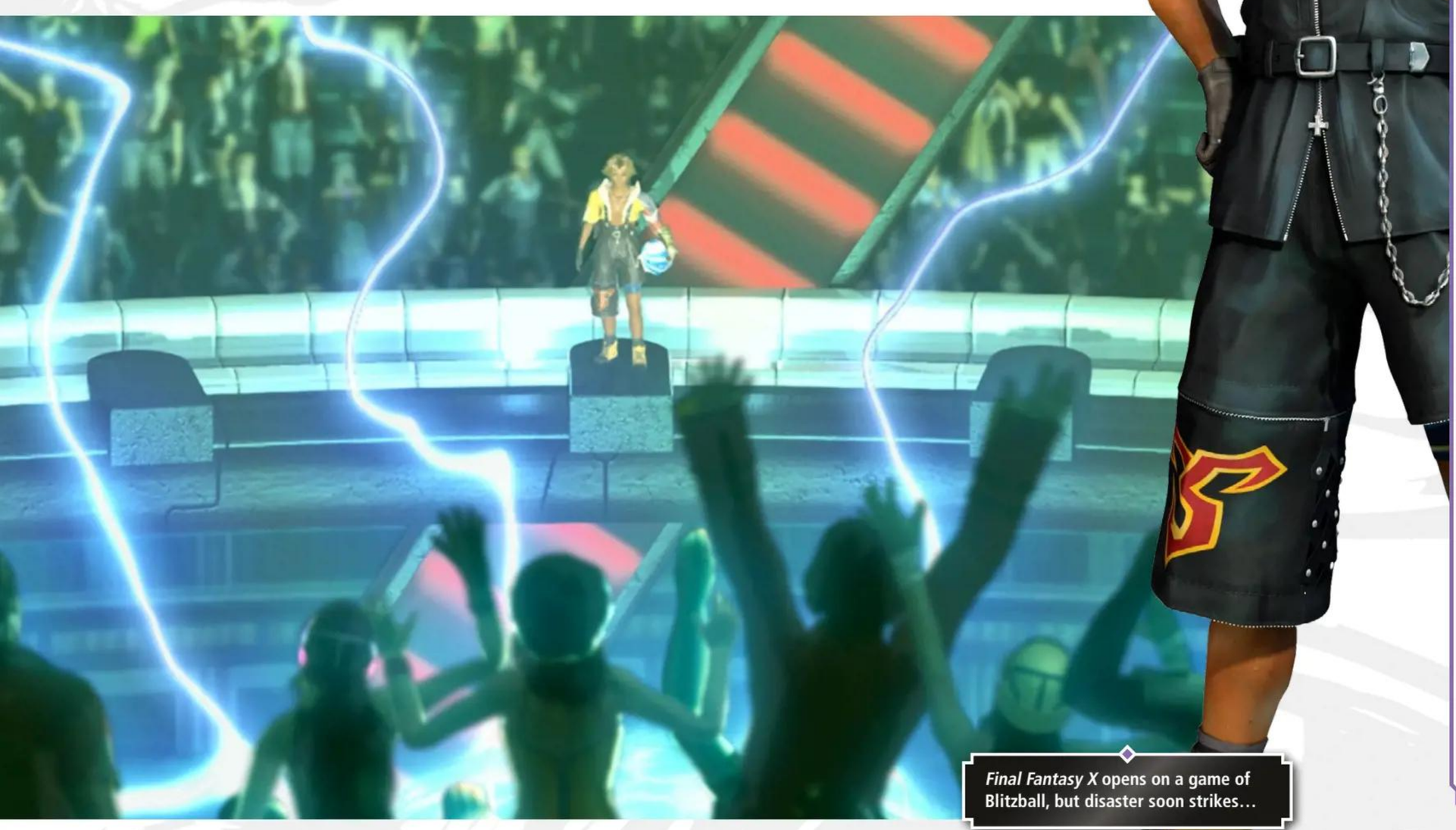
Every member of the main party has an engaging backstory and varied gameplay

Conditional Turn-Based Battle system that gave you as much time as you liked for each action, giving more importance to each attack or spell. Summons were revamped too, with Aeons joining you in battle and able to assist you with multiple actions instead of one move like before. Each party member, Aeons and even some enemy bosses had their own unique Overdrive, this edition's version of Limit Breaks. These ranged from high-damaging attacks to multi-casting magic to mixing items.

The progression system was detailed, flexible and very different to what came before. Abilities were learned by unlocking nodes on a Sphere Grid. Ability Points earned from battle allowed you to move around the board, while different spheres collected from encounters enabled players to unlock stat boosts and abilities. Each party member started in different areas of the grid, with different types of nodes available to boost their respective stats, such as agility for Tidus, accuracy for Wakka, strength for Auron and magic for Lulu. The world map was also dispensed with and replaced with a more linear direction of travel – at least until players acquired the late-game airship.

"Improved graphics and voice acting make *FFX* an intensely emotional game"

Religion plays a huge part in *FFX*, with many characters following the teachings of Yevon. The game's main puzzle, the



Final Fantasy X opens on a game of Blitzball, but disaster soon strikes…

FFX and XI minigames

Both titles had their fair share of minigames away from the main story

The Monster Arena

The Monster Arena in the Calm Lands involves catching enemies in random encounters using the Capture ability. They can then be fought in the arena, which is a good way to obtain rare items that they own and battle new enemies in preparation for a special superboss.

Blitzball

Spira's favourite sport isn't just confined to the epic intro. Players take part in matches, enlisting blitzballers from all over Spira. Winning unlocks new items, as well as Overdrives for Wakka – and the satisfaction of leading the Besaid Aurochs to victory, of course.

Butterfly Hunt

Taking place in Macalania Woods, Tidus can catch butterflies around the forest. Make sure you catch the blue ones within the time limit, but avoid the red ones, otherwise you'll be thrust into a battle. Your reward? An upgrade to Kimahri's ultimate weapon, the Spirit Lance.

Raise a Chocobo

Sick of renting Chocobos in *FFXI*? Raise your own! You'll need a Chocobo egg, but after it hatches you'll be tasked with raising it, maintaining its affection by feeding it Gysahl Greens. Your Chocobo can be summoned in the field and personalised with different colours.

Fishing or gardening?

Too many battles can become tiring in *FFXI*, so why not retire for a bit of gardening? Earn some spare Gil or rare materials through selling your plants. Not green-fingered? Why not pick up a rod and take up fishing to earn Gil, boost your skills and catch fish for cooking!

The thriving city of Luca showcased the graphical power of the PS2

☞ Cloister of Trials, are set in Yevon's temples and require you to insert spheres into pedestals to gain access to the next summon and the next area of the game. Another fun sidequest that thrilled completionists was discovering the Al Bhed language. As well as humans, Spira is populated by other peoples, such as the Guado and the Ronso. Human outsiders, the Al Bhed, speak their own language and, to understand it, the player needs to collect a number of primers to translate it.

As ever, the epic scope and scale of the game is matched by a brilliant soundtrack. The music is first in the series to not be solely composed by Uematsu, with tracks also contributed by Masashi Hamauzu and Junya Nakano. The soundtrack is both powerful and emotional, with the songs 'Zanarkand' and 'Wandering' illustrating the sadness that's present in the game's themes, while tracks like 'Besaid' and 'Spira Unplugged' reflect the gentle and breezy nature of the setting.

Final Fantasy X was a worldwide smash hit. More than two million units were sold in Japan on the day it hit the shelves. This was followed by more than five million sales worldwide. Reviews were very positive, with only some slight reservations towards the voice acting. The game went on to become one of the best-selling PlayStation 2 titles. A huge hit, where would Square go from here? The answer was online.

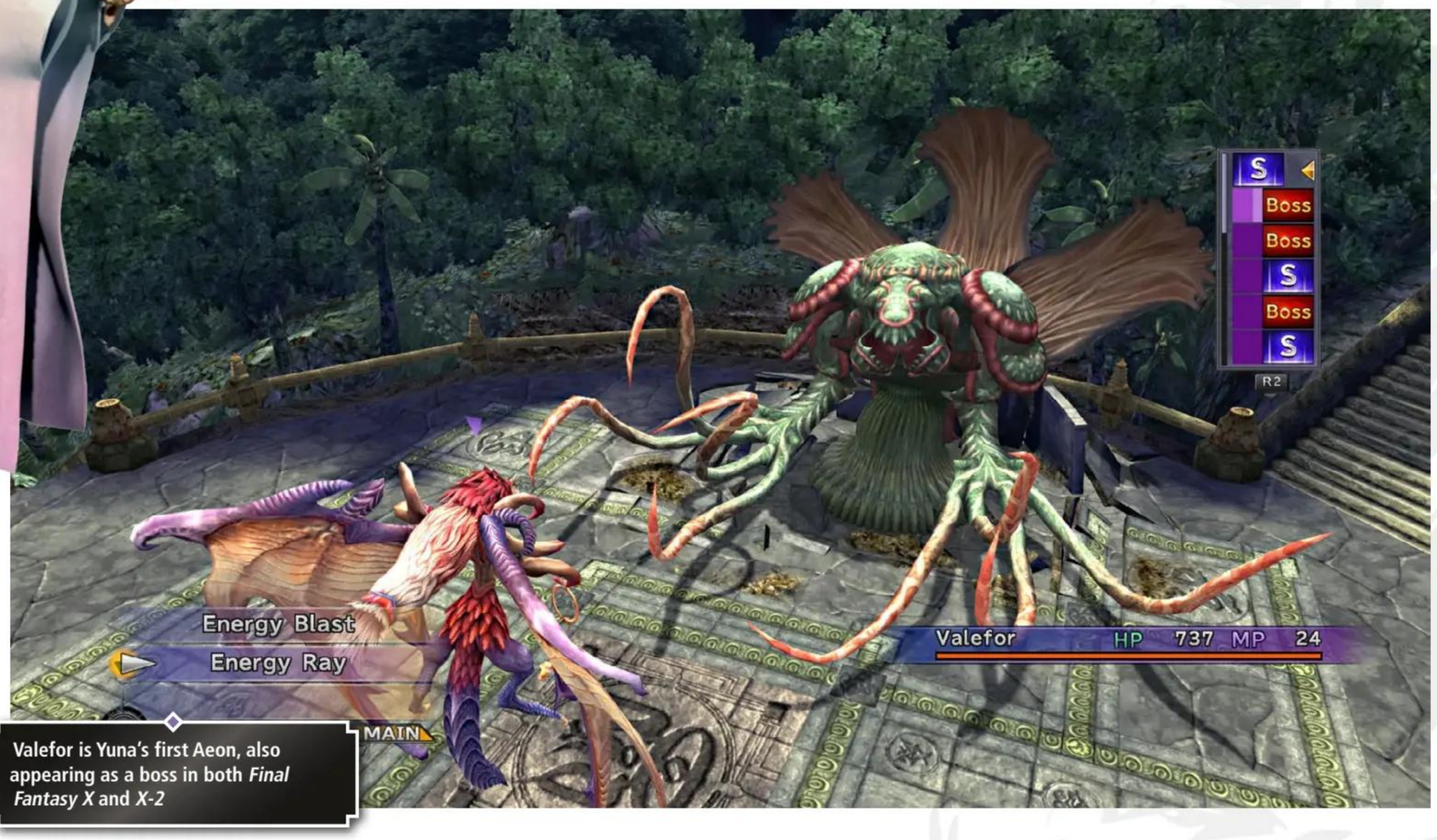
Final Fantasy had never been online before, and fans had reservations about the next entry in the series being a multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG). This was a relative jump into the unknown, as network console play was still in its infancy, but Square had been influenced by the success of American MMORPG *EverQuest*. The game required a monthly subscription to play and was released on PlayStation 2 in Japan in 2002, then on Microsoft Windows a year later, first in North America and then, finally, in Europe. Rather than having assigned characters as before, players were provided with a customisable lead character called the Adventurer. Players can choose from different ethnicities and facial and body features and 22 different job classes, harking back to *Final Fantasy III*'s system.

The world of Vana'diel is a diverse and vivid setting that was ready for people to get lost in. Five races roamed the map, each with their own strengths and weakness. The hulking Galka, naturally, had high HP but low MP, while the tiny Tarutaru are the opposite. Elvaans are strong healers, while the human-like Humes are good all-rounders, and the feline Mithra excel in agility. The five are known as the Enlightened Races and engage in combat with orcs, goblins and other factions from the Beastmen Horde. You start in one of three cities depending on which job you choose, and join other online players to traverse the world of Vana'diel, undertaking various missions and quests. You can do this on foot, via a Chocobo or by hitching a ride on an airship.

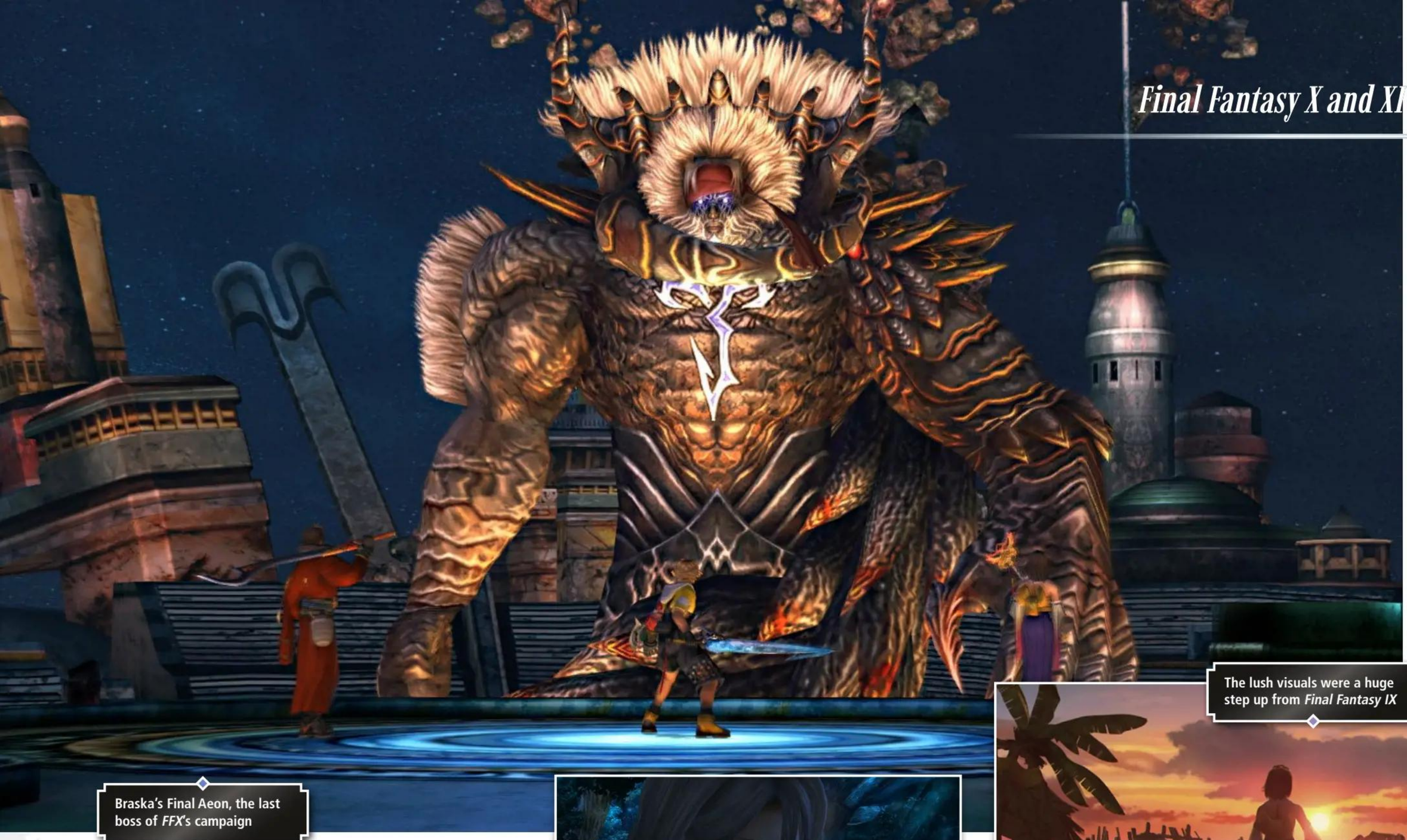
In a new feature for the series, players engage in real-time battles where enemies move around the world rather than random encounters that take place on a separate battle screen. To improve your chances in combat, unleashing a sequence of the same type of abilities results in a Skillchain or a Magic Burst that can cause extra damage. Players can use Crystal Synthesis to combine crystals and other materials to create useful items for battle. Each player has their own personal Mog House where you store items, restore your HP and MP and even change your job class if you so wish.

Levelling is achieved through gaining experience points, but the game encourages you to join parties of players for greater rewards. Before *XI*, all *Final*

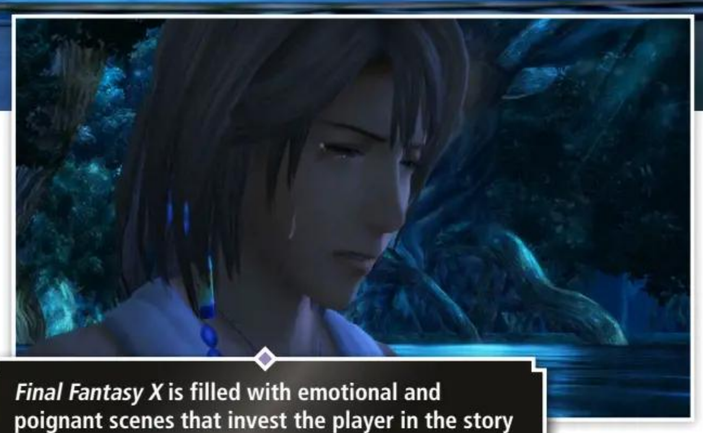
"The epic scope and scale of the game is matched by a brilliant soundtrack"



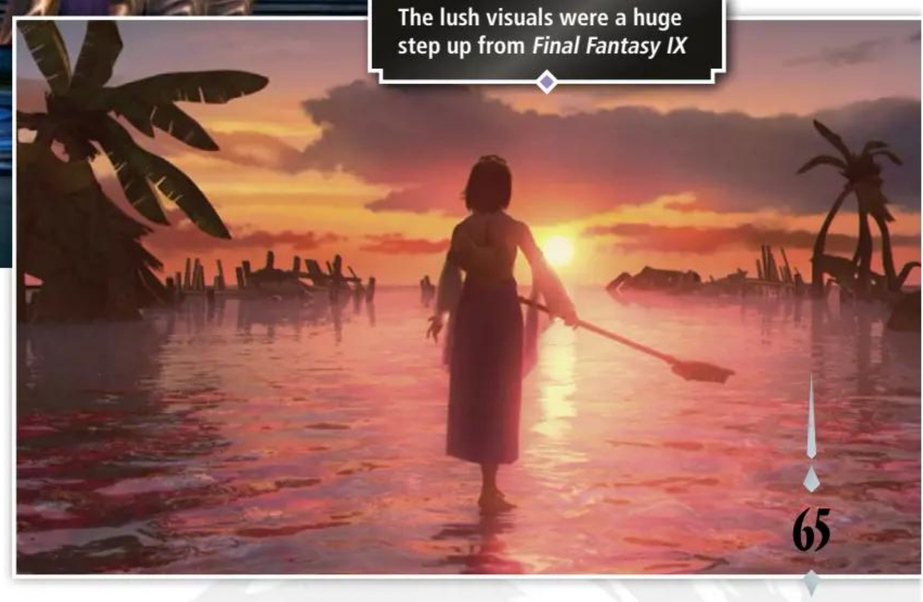
Valefor is Yuna's first Aeon, also appearing as a boss in both *Final Fantasy X* and *X-2*



Braska's Final Aeon, the last boss of *FFX*'s campaign



Final Fantasy X is filled with emotional and poignant scenes that invest the player in the story



The lush visuals were a huge step up from *Final Fantasy IX*

Fantasy games had predominantly been one-player games (some simplistic modes in *IV*, *V* and *VI* aside), but *FFXI* was designed to be experienced with others, as each job class has its own pronounced strengths and weaknesses that can be utilised and covered respectively when teaming up with others. *Final Fantasy XI* is the first in the series to use Tactical Points, which are earned when taking or dealing damage. When you have enough, you can use Weapon Skills to help turn the tide in battle.

While *Final Fantasy X* was both a natural and awe-inspiring upgrade on what came before, *Final Fantasy XI* was a harder sell. The first game to go online, Square had to convince buyers to ensure their PS2 was online, had a network adapter and were willing to pay a subscription fee. Nevertheless, the game experienced steady sales, launching on Xbox 360 in 2006. Today, only the PC version is playable after the PS2 and Xbox 360 servers were shut down in 2016. The game has been regularly improved with bug fixes and a number of expansion packs, with the final one releasing as recently as 2020. Popular additions include more job types and the ability to sync levels with other players so you're not severely over or under-levelled compared to others when venturing out on quests.

Both games remain popular today. *Final Fantasy X* was the last traditional turn-based *Final Fantasy* game as the series moved into more action-orientated titles. It also spawned a sequel two years after its release, *Final Fantasy X-2*. *Final Fantasy XI*, meanwhile, continues to be popular to this day and still has thousands of online users. It has even earned Square (now Square Enix) the most profit of any game in the series. *Final Fantasy* had successfully made the jump to the next era of videogaming, both offline and online, as two of the flagship titles for what was to become the best-selling games console of all time.

Final Fantasy X-2

The first direct sequel in the series was very different to its predecessor

Final Fantasy X was so popular, and its story so rich, that it was followed by a sequel two years after. From the off, this was a very different game. While *X* began with a Blitzball game during the destruction of Zanarkand, *X-2* starts with Summoner turned popstar Yuna singing to an adoring stadium crowd. So far, so different.

Fans of the franchise were taken aback, but despite the poppy and campy tone, inside was a deep and engaging game that expands *Final Fantasy X*'s strong narrative. *Final Fantasy X-2* changed up the gameplay by only having three playable characters. Yuna and Rikku are joined by newcomer Paine as part of the sphere-hunting group the Gullwings. They're on a mission to find Tidus and explore a renewed Spira, experiencing the Eternal Calm.

The lightness of the Dressphere gameplay, a fun riff on the classic job classes, is counterbalanced by the heavy themes of loss, longing and friendship. Unusually for a *Final Fantasy* game, the majority of the map is open to the player via airship from the start of the game, and players can now climb and jump through environments. *FFX-2* was no doubt a left-field turn, but a really enjoyable one.

FINAL FAN

FINAL FANTASY XII

Years in the making, this PS2 game was a total reinvention of the RPG series. With it returning to modern consoles in HD in 2019, we spoke to Square Enix about creating this daring classic

Final Fantasy is well known for throwing out its characters and worlds between entries and starting again. To an outsider, it might look like they're just swapping one set of melodramatic, spiky-haired and buckle-clad teenagers for another, but this is far from the only thing that changes in this RPG series. From 1988's *Final Fantasy II* onwards, SquareSoft would reinvent the underlying systems of the combat and character progression in every sequel. Yet it would still retain a very traditional turn-based battle system right up until *Final Fantasy X* on PS2 – a predictable sequence of random encounters, an iconic victory theme and some form of levelling up. For a long time, all of this seemed resistant to change.

Final Fantasy XII was the bravest game released in the series. It jettisoned turn-based combat for a real-time system that had no random encounters. Enemies were instead spread across sprawling fields, and the transition between combat and exploration was seamless. Using a smart new system called Gambits, you could program your characters to automatically execute perfect party strategies, telling them exactly when to attack, heal or cast a spell. Even by the standards of a series built on reinventing itself, it was radical.

FFXII came from the lineage of the PSone's *Final Fantasy Tactics* and *Vagrant Story*, sharing their setting of Ivalice, as well as their character designer (Akihiko Yoshida) and game director (Yasumi Matsuno). Several years into a long, five-year-plus development cycle, Matsuno dropped out of *FFXII* reportedly due to health concerns. While much of the story surrounding *Final Fantasy XII*'s creation became about Matsuno's departure, he was joined as co-director of the project by long-time *Final Fantasy* battle design mastermind Hiroyuki Ito. This meant the vision of the game didn't change too much when Matsuno left.

"We had many experienced development staff in the team, such as Hiroyuki Ito, who was in charge of many of the battle designs for previous numbered *Final Fantasy* titles, and had a clear vision of what we had to do up to the game's launch, so the development of the game or the overall vision was not really affected," says *FFXII*'s project manager, Hiroaki Kato.

It's previously been reported that after Matsuno departed the project, the development team was restructured, but Kato denies this was the case. The project was extensively delayed from a targeted summer 2004 release date, eventually reaching Japan in May 2006 – but this was due to the ambition behind the project rather than his leaving. "That reorganisation of the development team

Vaan and Penelo are your typical 'fish-out-of-water' protagonists

☞ did not actually happen, so no differences in the process arose from this," Kato says. "The biggest challenge in *Final Fantasy XII* was transitioning from the menu-based battle system separated from the exploration in previous *Final Fantasy* titles, to seamless, real-time battles using the Gambit system. We also added in a great many more elements for replay value, such as the bounty hunts, so we needed to adjust and balance out the game itself and the battle system, and that is what we needed the time for."

The Gambit system lets players choose their abilities, and when to execute them. You can set your characters to automatically attack enemies on less than 50 per cent health, for example, or to heal allies who are on less than 30 per cent health – then you can prioritise these commands to achieve the best results. The fighting plays out automatically, but you can also manually select moves if needed. The Gambits start as simply as characters attacking the enemies who are nearest to them, though it's later made complicated by many more abilities, customisable conditions and additional Gambit slots. It's very basic programming, but it's also more complex than anything *Final Fantasy* had challenged players with before at that time.

While some of *FFXII*'s characters feel a bit dull, the game's combat and exploration makes up for it

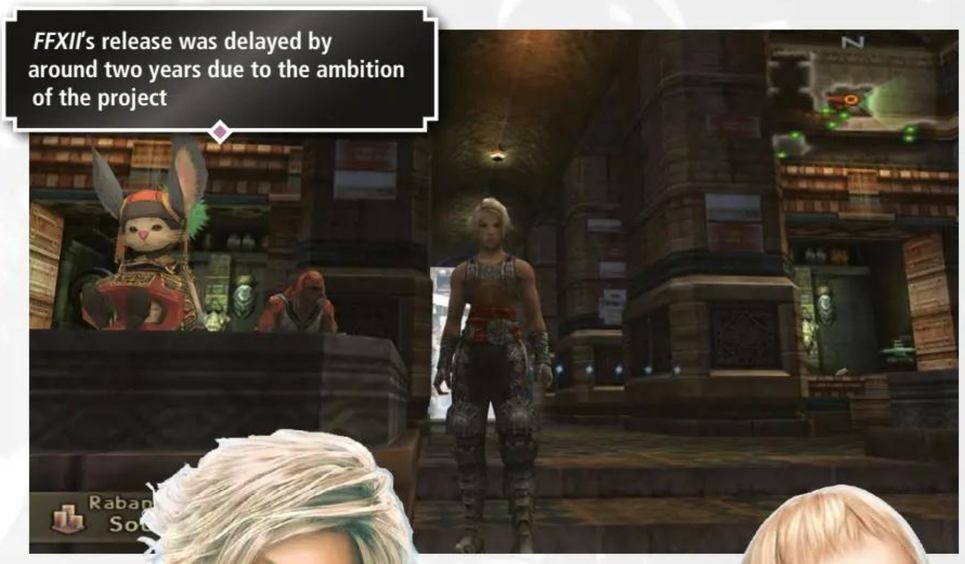
Depending on the player, with their individual tastes and preferences, some of them may feel *Final Fantasy XII*'s game system is too complicated," Kato says. "However, from a development point of view, rather than seeing it as complicated, we feel that these different opinions come from how well different players can get used to the new systems that have been implemented," he continues. "When you look at current-generation games, there are many games released with an open-world setting and real-time battles, where the character development is deep and players can really enjoy the exploration. I feel that the players have gotten used to playing these kind of games, so from that perspective I don't think *Final Fantasy XII* is a complicated game. I recognise *Final Fantasy XII* as a game that has depth and that lets players enjoy many playing styles."

> "I recognise FFXII as a game that has depth and that lets players enjoy many playing styles"
>
> **Hiroaki Kato**

He's not wrong – that flexibility and strategy is why *FFXII* is so exciting. The Gambit system is coupled to the License Board, which lets players unlock the new abilities they acquire throughout the world, as well as powerful attacks and summons. It is a little trickier to grasp than something like, say, *Final Fantasy X*, where all that's required to use an ability is to unlock it, then select it in battle. But the nature of Gambits means the player gets the pleasure of building a sequence of intricate strategies, then watching them play out. There's far more tactical scope to it than mainline *Final Fantasy* typically offers.

With no random battles, the continuous cycle of fighting and exploring offers a very different pace to previous games, where battles are famously heightened with dramatic music and punctuated with the aforementioned victory theme. This only plays infrequently in *Final Fantasy XII*. You can chain combos of enemies to obtain better loot, and take part in bounty hunts for specific monsters. What this seamless design does is create a more tangible world, and the sense of a functioning ecosystem between its wildlife.

FFXII's release was delayed by around two years due to the ambition of the project



VAAN

FFXII's de facto main character, although he's a real bore. Vaan lives on the streets of Rabanastre, and gets pulled into the battle against the Archadian Empire, the war having claimed the life of his brother, Reks.

PENELO

Vaan's childhood friend and marginally more interesting than him, she gets dragged into the war as well. Penelo dreams of becoming a dancer, and her Quickening attacks – *FFXII*'s equivalent of Limit Breaks – reflect that.

"*Final Fantasy XII* was a title where we committed to really building up the world of Ivalice," Kato says. "While we were setting out the climate, cultures, races and the state of affairs of Ivalice, it seemed that implementing the ecosystem of the monsters was the next natural step. The fact that many players who have just started playing *Final Fantasy XII* will accidently attack the Wild Saurian in the Dalmasca Estersand (it's a high-level monster that is not hostile towards the player) and get defeated, leading to [a] game over, is kind of amusing." Most players will probably remember that giant patrolling dinosaur from the game's opening hours – it's intimidating to look at, but by leaving you alone, it's the world's way of telling you that not everything in *FFXII* is out to kill you.

While Ivalice is divided into too many truncated land-masses to feel truly open-world in the way that something like *Skyrim* does now, it's leagues ahead of the small pockets of towns and pared-down world maps seen in previous *Final Fantasy* games. The architecture of towns in *FFXII* is dense, and shops are filled with objects. Ivalice is portrayed in a complete-feeling way.

This setting had previously appeared in several other games created by Matsuno, but this was our most comprehensive look at Ivalice yet. "At its core, *Final Fantasy Tactics* had a 'miniature garden'-like field where the 2D characters battled in a turn-based system, while *Final Fantasy XII* was reproducing Ivalice's environments in 360 degrees with real-time movement and battle progression. So you could say it is only natural that *Final Fantasy XII* required a greater density of information in the art." Being fully 3D makes a huge difference, and more in line with the RPGs we're used to today – you could spin the camera around and enjoy the detail of the world for the first time. It's helped the game age incredibly well.

FFXII's combat and exploration offsets some of the game's weaknesses, like its thoroughly boring protagonist, Vaan, and an overplayed, dry story of a resistance group ousting an occupying evil empire. Your hero is overshadowed by the cast that surrounds him – including rightful heir to the Dalmascan throne, Ashe, and Han Solo-esque sky pirate Balthier. There's also the memorably weary wanted man Basch, alongside Vaan's slightly-

ASHE

The heir to the kingdom of Dalmasca, Ashe operates undercover after her husband, Rasler, is murdered, and her kingdom is overthrown by the Archadian empire. Her journey is about taking the land back.

The License Board was thrown away for a proper Job system in *FFXII*'s re-releases

Balthier and Fran remind us of Han and Chewie… only they've been kicked through JRPG Design 101

The Ivalice Alliance

The games that share Final Fantasy XII's world

Final Fantasy Tactics

This PSone tactical RPG was the first game set in Ivalice, as envisioned by Yasumi Matsuno, although here it's represented by some simple isometric backgrounds. The original *Tactics* features a deep job system, as well as a cameo from *FFVII*'s Cloud. It was later re-released as *Final Fantasy Tactics: War Of The Lions* on PSP.

Vagrant Story

A true cult classic, *Vagrant Story* is an RPG with puzzle elements thrown in, too, as well as specific targeting of enemy body parts, giving it a bit of a dungeon crawler feel. It's a more complicated game than *FFXII*, but no less beloved. *Vagrant Story*'s character designs are unmistakably the work of Akihiko Yoshida as well.

Final Fantasy Tactics Advance

A cutesy-looking (but no less hardcore) tactical RPG from Square, *FF Tactics Advance* is instead set in an Ivalice imagined by children, though many of the same elements recur, like its species and rule-enforcing Judges.

Final Fantasy XII: Revenant Wings

The second time *Final Fantasy* has received a direct sequel, after *FFX-2*, *Revenant Wings* is set after *XII* but looks and feels very different. This isometric RPG works in real time, like its predecessor, but requires more direct input from the player, so can get slightly busy on the DS's tiny screen. It'd be a better fit for tablets or PC.

Final Fantasy Tactics A2: Grimoire Of The Rift

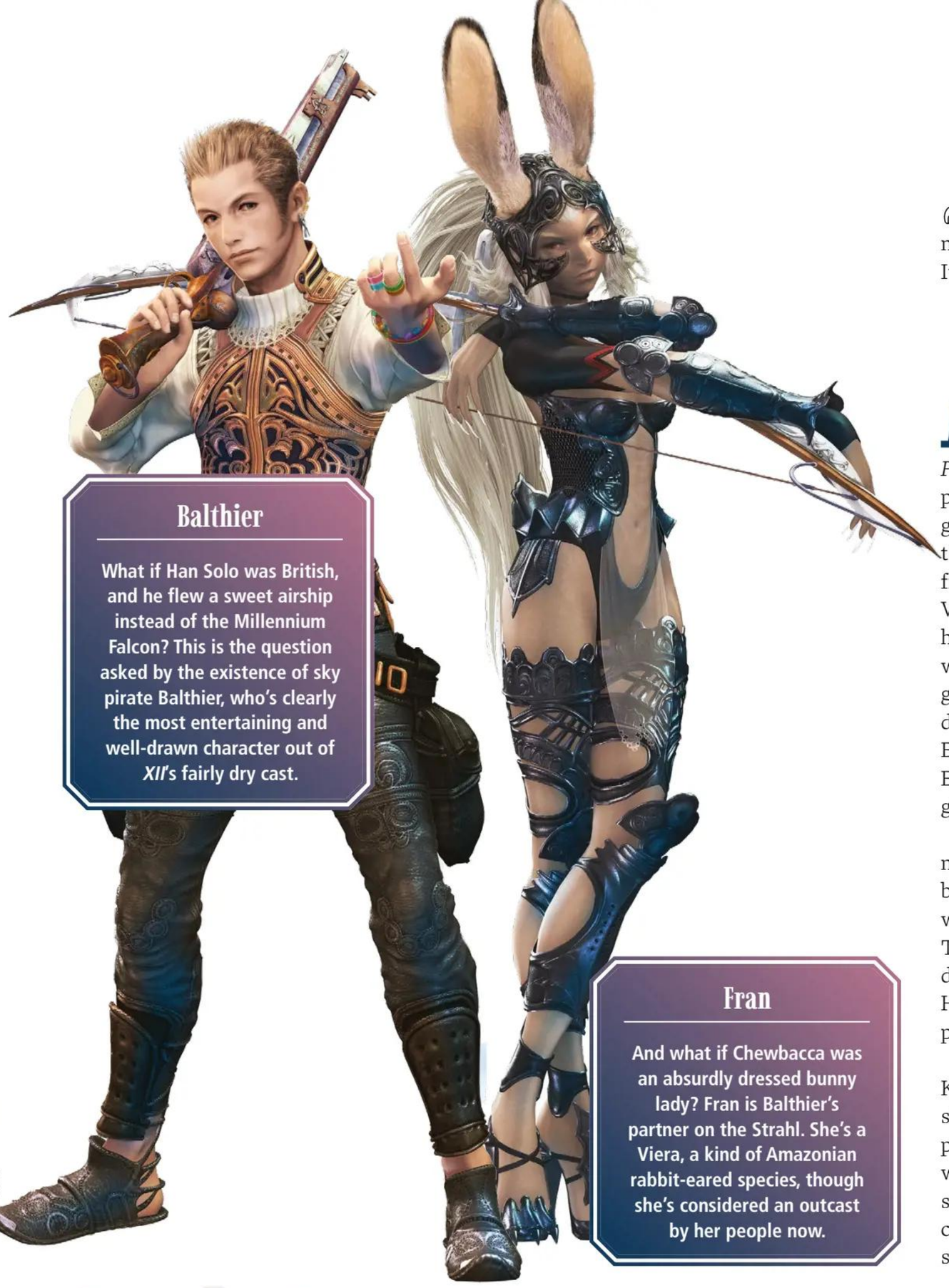
As part of the Ivalice Alliance sequence of games, the setting was revisited yet again in this sequel to the GBA game, which retains its in-depth job system and tactical combat but with a few tweaks. This was the last *FF Tactics* game. It's long overdue a revival at this point.

Crystal Defenders

This tower defence/RPG fusion came out near the end of the Noughties, at the height of the TD genre's popularity, and was released on every console from the previous generation, as well as smartphones. It's no one's favourite *FF* spin-off, though, and other games in this list offer far more comrehensive visions of Ivalice.

Final Fantasy XIV: Stormblood

Technically not set in Ivalice, this well-loved MMO's expansion features a 24-person raid called Return to Ivalice, which explores that world once again with creative oversight from Yasumi Matsuno. *FFXIV* has built up a reputation as a great fan-service MMO – this only adds to that.



Balthier

What if Han Solo was British, and he flew a sweet airship instead of the Millennium Falcon? This is the question asked by the existence of sky pirate Balthier, who's clearly the most entertaining and well-drawn character out of *XII*'s fairly dry cast.

Fran

And what if Chewbacca was an absurdly dressed bunny lady? Fran is Balthier's partner on the Strahl. She's a Viera, a kind of Amazonian rabbit-eared species, though she's considered an outcast by her people now.

☞ less-dull-friend Penelo. Balthier's partner, the rabbit-like member of the Viera species, the ludicrously dressed Fran, helps make Ivalice feel like a varied backdrop with a deep, pre-existing lore.

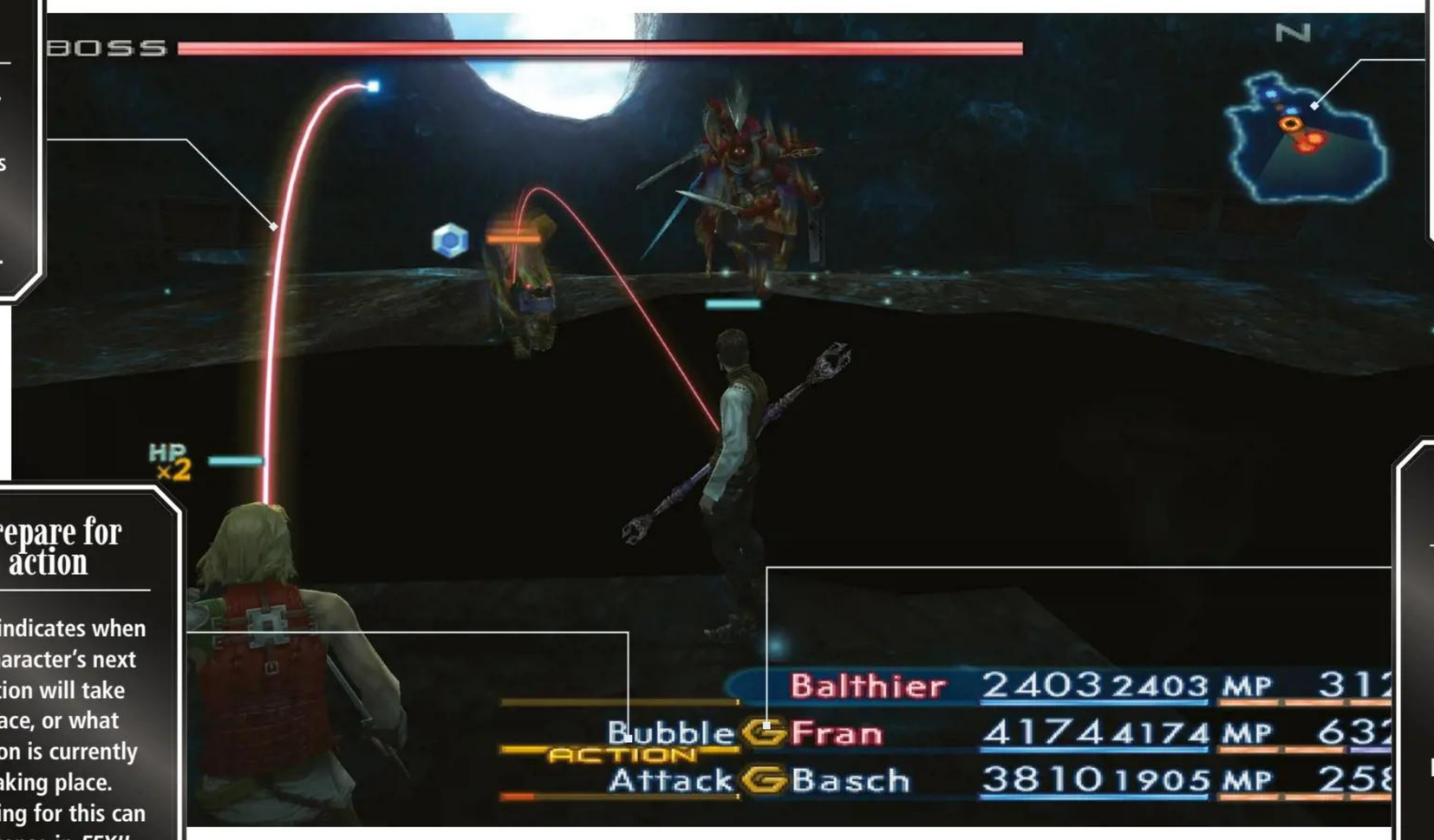
All of this is lifted by a localisation job that's significantly better than that seen in *Final Fantasy X*. The drama is professionally constructed, one-liners land well and the cast is memorably varied in nationality. It doesn't sound like bad anime, basically, and that makes a huge difference. "I think *Final Fantasy X*'s voice acting was good as well," says Kato when we point out criticism of the game. "The reason *Final Fantasy XII* got great reviews was because we learned from our experiences of doing the voice acting on *Final Fantasy X*. I mean, *Final Fantasy X* was the first ever numbered *Final Fantasy* title that implemented voice acting! We had more experience in development on the PlayStation 2 hardware, so we were able to create smoother character expressions with voices, and the localisation staff that were working on this game were excellent. I think another big point was that we used different voice actors with different accents (such as American English, British English, Latin American English and Northern European English) depending on the character's origin and race, to give the game more realism."

The Viera have Icelandic accents, for example, while the decision to make the Archadian Empire British and Dalmascans American was borrowed straight from *Star Wars*, according to a US Gamer interview with translator Alexander O Smith and casting director Jack Fletcher. That said, the story generally has a bit of *Star Wars* feel, with its big-dreaming protagonist, and obvious analogues to Princess Leia and Han Solo in Ashe and Balthier respectively – particularly as the latter pilots a cool airship.

Rather than being inspired by George Lucas's space opera, though, Kato instead suggests they were both tapping into similarly pervasive staples of popular fiction. "We weren't influenced by *Star Wars* (but personally, *Star Wars* is one of my most favourite films!). *FFXII* has what you might call quite 'orthodox' archetypal characters and story, so we were developing it with that in mind. I think *Star Wars* was also created with an orthodox, archetypal storyline and characters, so some players may perceive that we were influenced by that. People

Battle Systems

Your guide to fighting Square's 12th fantasy



The thin red line

This line – blue for allies, red for enemies – indicates which character is currently being targeted by whom.

Mapped for success

This shows enemies' proximity to your characters. You can run away from opponents if you're underpowered or your Gambits are badly organised.

Prepare for action

This indicates when a character's next action will take place, or what action is currently taking place. Waiting for this can be tense in *FFXII*.

Gambling on gambits

This 'G' symbol indicates that Gambits are currently active. Note that Balthier's are not, meaning he is being manually controlled by the player.

The voice acting and drama in *Final Fantasy XII* was better than anything that had come before in the series

often ask if *Star Wars* was influenced by this work or that too, but when trying to create an archetypal, orthodox story it is the same kinds of easily recognisable themes and content that will appeal to viewers or players, so they may well confuse the fact they are easy to understand with having seen them somewhere else before."

Final Fantasy XII returned in 2019 with *The Zodiac Age*, a PS4 HD reissue that's built on the *International Zodiac Job System* version only released in Japan on PlayStation 2. It's not quite the same game as the original, with the License Board traded for a dedicated job progression system, allowing for more meaningful differences between each of the party members. In this version, you can assign two jobs to your characters for more flexibility. There's also an autosave function this time, a minimap and a high-speed mode to make those battles go by quickly, alongside other tweaks.

The goal wasn't to simplify the RPG, just to give players more of a chance to understand its systems. *Final Fantasy XII* throws players in at the deep end, and clearly critics didn't mind at the time, but opening the game up to more people was no bad thing. It's hard to dispute that the main attraction of the reissue is seeing Ivalice and its characters in HD, though. It's worth remembering that *Final Fantasy XII* came out after *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* – this was one of the PS2's last big games. Like Clover Studio's *Okami*, it showed how much potential was still left in the hardware at the time.

"*Final Fantasy XII* was a title that was loved by many players, and we heard many voices from fans asking to create a high-definition version," Kato says. "We not only just made it high-definition, we implemented new gameplay systems and improved the game vastly, so I feel the players can enjoy a new playing experience in *FFXII*. In relation to the art, we built the original game pushing the very limits of the PS2, so when looked at in hindsight from the current generation, it may well appear to have been out of its time. I feel that because we were able to create it like that, it made it perfect to convert into a high-quality, high-definition game."

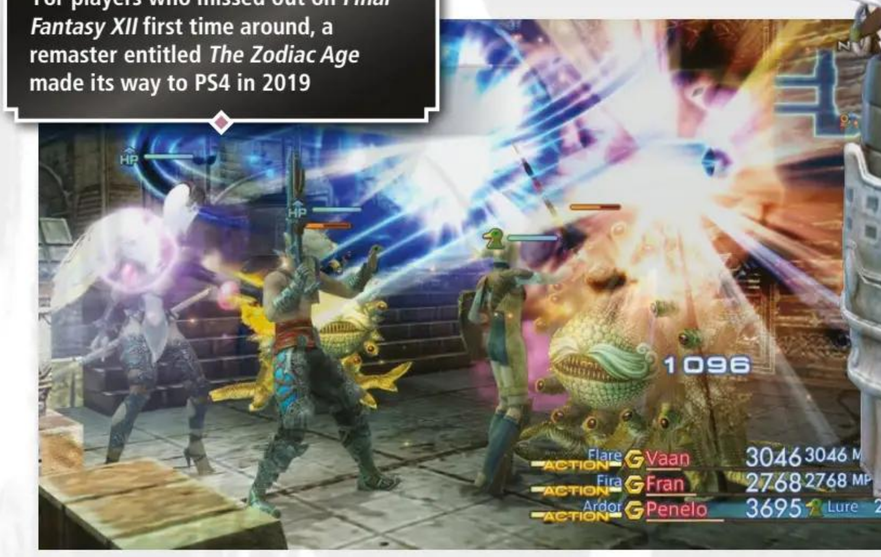
Akihiko Yoshida's character designs still look fantastic today, with an almost painterly style to the 3D models, particularly around the eyes. This stops the game from dating quite as fast as some older 3D games do – the translation of the art is amazing. "I think that effect comes from how hard we worked on creating the characters to look like the original Akihiko Yoshida drawings are actually moving," Kato says. "In *Final Fantasy XII The Zodiac Age*, we have been able to improve the visual depictions that were limited by the PlayStation 2 hardware even further. I heard they had the new visuals shown to Mr Yoshida as well, and carried out the improvements based on the original art with his supervision, so I hope the fans can enjoy that."

FFXII marked the last time the long-running RPG series was truly ahead of the curve, and it warrants such a celebration. The series' great strength, more so than creating grand stories and iconic characters that appeal to young people, is in brilliantly designed and complex battle systems that are presented simply to the player. The developers wanted to create a new version of that in a well-realised world, and they undoubtedly succeeded. "Honestly, that intention was so strong that we don't really have a feeling that we left a legacy or anything like that," Kato says. "Personally, I really like open-world games with seamless, real-time battles, so seeing games with that kind of system being released since *Final Fantasy XII* makes me really happy."

> "We not only just made it HD, we implemented new gameplay systems and improved the game vastly"
>
> **Hiroaki Kato**

Basch

Blamed for the murder of the king of Dalmasca at the start of *FFXII*, Basch seeks to clear his name. Early in the game, your party breaks him out of jail, after he's wrongly declared dead by the occupying Archadian forces.



For players who missed out on *Final Fantasy XII* first time around, a remaster entitled *The Zodiac Age* made its way to PS4 in 2019

CHAPTER VI

Disaster and Reconciliation

Naoki Yoshida

When the merger between Square and Enix happened in 2002, there may have been a sort of awkward feeling, because a lot of external people came into the company, myself included. People who were on the Square side, making *Final Fantasy* in-house, may have felt a little strange having a lot of people coming in from the outside.

I'd worked with the *Dragon Quest* series for about five years, and joined the *Final Fantasy XIV* project after 1.0 had launched. Honestly speaking, when 1.0 was going through its testing phases, I heard from outside sources that the game was horrible. But I thought, at that time, because we had *Final Fantasy XI*, which was a very successful MMO for Square Enix, maybe it was just that the players were comparing it to that. Perhaps it was suffering by comparison. Besides, MMO launches are never smooth to begin with. That was the feeling that I had, not being part of the project yet.

But when 1.0 fully launched, there was so much negative backlash around the world that the company began to scramble to find out what had gone wrong. A team of developers were assigned to investigate the situation. For example, the company asked Hiroshi Minagawa, who was directing *Final Fantasy XII* at the time, to look at user interface. Yoshihisa Hashimoto, who was CTO during that period, was asked to look at the battle system. We assigned Mr Hiroshi Takai, who was a VFX artist who worked on the *SaGa* series and *Final Fantasy V*, to go in and investigate what was wrong with the launch of version 1.0.

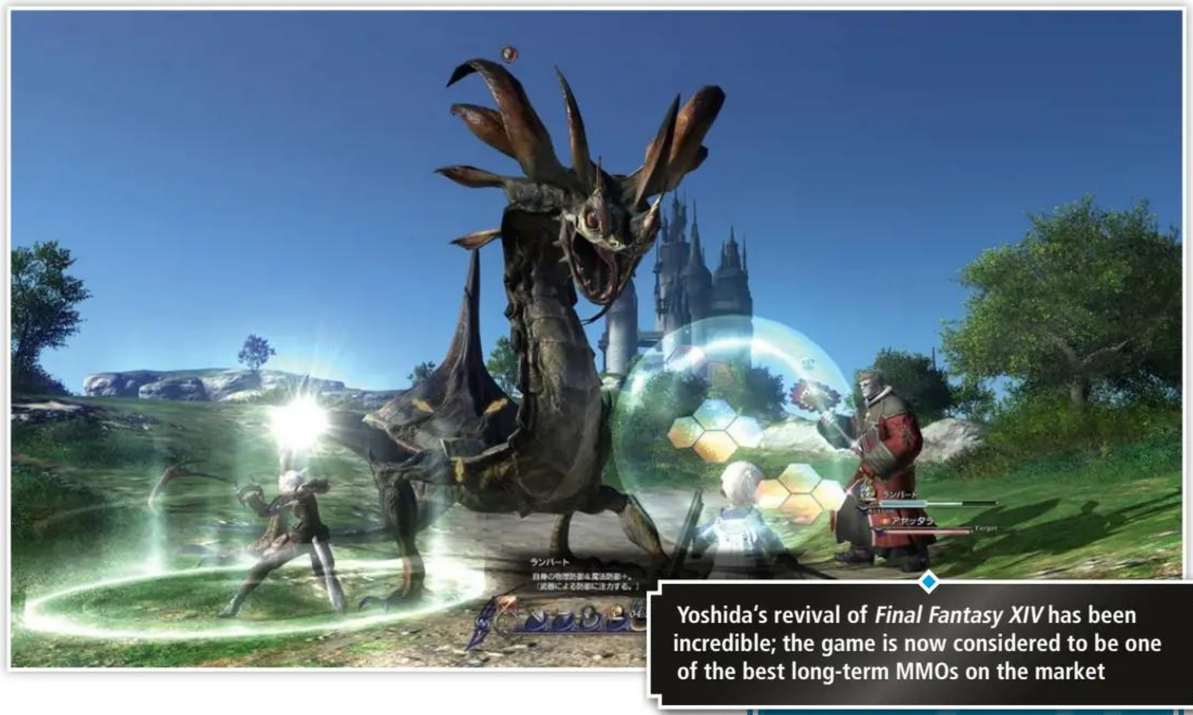
That team would often consult with me, even though I wasn't a part of the investigation at that stage. At night, they'd ask: "What should we check next?" It may have been that those people trusted me as a game developer, and a game director, to provide advice. But I was kind of working on the game on a volunteer basis at that point. Around mid-October in 2010, I consulted with our CEO at the time, Yoichi Wada, and I told him, "We're in very bad shape. It's an emergency. We can't just install a couple of people to fix everything; we're in a very grave situation." I tried to bring it up with the upper management.

At that time, I was about to embark on a new project. The CEO thought, 'Well, we can handle this with the current *Final Fantasy XIV* team; we don't want you to go over there.' The CEO made the decision that I wasn't necessary. I wasn't happy to hear that so I fought back. I said, "Okay then. Never talk to me about *Final Fantasy XIV* again. If you think the problem can be solved with a Band-Aid patched on top of it, don't talk to me about it ever again." He was not happy to hear me say that, but he didn't get angry at me.

> "I said, 'Okay. Never talk to me about Final Fantasy XIV again'"
>
> **Naoki Yoshida**

Of course, the development team continued to consult me. They were very hard-working about it. I loved the fact that those developers were still working very hard, and I wanted to support them. So I continued to assist for about a month, but the game's condition continued to deteriorate. I remember it very clearly to this day. On November 26, 2010, at 4am, the CEO officially asked me: "Could you please handle matters on *Final Fantasy XIV*?" I said, "Well, if you insist, then I'm willing to help."

At that time I had two objectives. Firstly I just wanted to think about what, starting from a blank slate, a *Final Fantasy* MMO would look like. I also wanted to take the 1.0 version of the game and do a thorough investigation to determine where its issues lay. Was it technology, or game design? Was it our asset pipeline? Just to see what our ideal looked like, and what our current situation looked like.



Yoshida's revival of *Final Fantasy XIV* has been incredible; the game is now considered to be one of the best long-term MMOs on the market

Naoki Yoshida

Naoki Yoshida joined Hudson Soft in 1993 where he worked on the *Bomberman* series. He joined Square Enix 11 years later to lead the *Dragon Quest: Monster Battle Road* series. An avid MMO fan, Yoshida was taken off *Dragon Quest X* to work as a consultant on the troubled *Final Fantasy XIV*. He saw that the root of the game's issues lay in its team's obsession with graphical fidelity. At a talk in 2014, Yoshida pointed out that, in the original *Final Fantasy XIV*, a single flowerpot contained around 1,000 polygons and 150 lines of shader code, "the same amount as the entire player-character model."

The original version of *Final Fantasy XIV* was indisputably the company's greatest failure to date

Final Fantasy XIII controversially dropped towns from the game, a much-criticised decision that left players to pursue the drama along long, linear pathways

Hajime Tabata

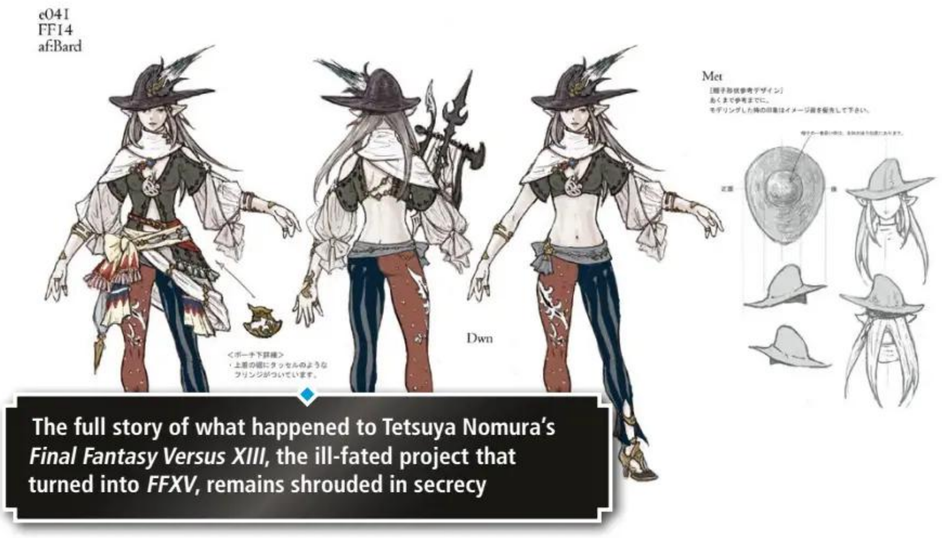
Hajime Tabata grew up in Sendai, in the north of Japan. As a child he dreamed of being a professional athlete. He studied economics in Tokyo, not through a particular interest in the subject, he says, but because he had the necessary exam results. Subsisting on a student diet of ramen and videogames, initially Tabata wanted to create recipes for instant ramen. While interviewing for jobs in various professions during his final year of study, Tecmo was the first company to offer Tabata a job after he left a memorable impression on the company's idiosyncratic founder, Yoshihito Kakihara, by giving him a sturdy massage during the final interview. During his time at the company, where Tabata was employed as a game designer, his responsibilities ranged from issuing apologies to Nintendo, to listening to irate customers' complaints on the phone.

☞ In order to do those two things, I realised there was something else I needed to do: give the development team a break. There had been such a negative response to the first incarnation of the game that it had affected the developers. Not only were they tired physically, but they were also under such mental stress. So to find the motivation and the strength to revamp the game, they needed time off. The other reason was that if we were to just continue developing at this pace without a break, I anticipated the team would come back with a lot of questions. 'What do we need to do next?' So many questions that there wouldn't be enough time to do our research on what was wrong. So by having them out of the way, so to speak, it gave me the time to do those two things I mentioned earlier.

We had about three weeks to do it. I would primarily handle the creation of my ideal *Final Fantasy* MMO, while my core team did the thorough investigation of 1.0. On December 28, I received the results of their work. It was night-time, and we were going through it, looking at the things they'd found.

It was very bad. So bad I ran a fever. I went into New Year's break looking at the results of their investigation, comparing it to my ideal *Final Fantasy* MMO, and spent the break looking at what needed to be fixed or updated, and setting some goals.

When comparing the two, the conclusion that I reached was that there was no way to fix *Final Fantasy XIV* unless we rebuilt the game from scratch. Even if we were to continue version 1.0 and try to fix it, adding content as we went along, the server structure itself was very poorly set up. I projected it would have had to shut down after three years, even if we tried to fix it. The server structure was just horribly messed up; it was not planned as a long-term operation.



The full story of what happened to Tetsuya Nomura's *Final Fantasy Versus XIII*, the ill-fated project that turned into *FFXV*, remains shrouded in secrecy

Hajime Tabata

In 2012 I took a phone call from our previous CEO, Yoichi Wada. He told me that there was a great deal of trouble with *Final Fantasy Versus XIII*, a separate project to *Final Fantasy XIII*. He told me that he was considering whether or not to cancel the project. If he did, he said, then he'd want to really start it up from scratch again and take it off in a new direction, and maybe have me take on that project.

There are problems with every videogame project, of course. But with *Final Fantasy Versus XIII* the period of trying to fix the issues just went on way too long. It had already been in development for six years by that point. It couldn't carry on in the same way. That was when I became involved and started to change the project towards becoming *Final Fantasy XV*.

Yoko Shimomura

Final Fantasy Versus XIII was the first *Final Fantasy* game that I composed music for. Because it was a spin-off game there wasn't the pressure I might have felt with a numbered [mainline] game. It was a gentle way in, although of course the game then morphed into a mainline title.

When the game changed to *Final Fantasy XV* it was a big moment for me. Some of the pressure was mitigated by the fact some of the music I had written for *Versus XIII* had already been accepted. Had I been asked to start again from scratch it may have been far more intimidating. About a third of the music I wrote for *Versus XIII* made it into *XV*.

Hashimoto Everyone was doing what they thought was right with these projects. Nobody was deliberately trying to grind the company into the dirt. But there are some things where the problem only becomes clear once the games take shape. Sometimes you only realise where you've gone wrong after the work is finished.

Tabata I didn't actually say "Yes" straightaway to the offer. I took it to my team and we discussed it all. In actual fact, about 90 per cent of the team were opposed to taking it on.

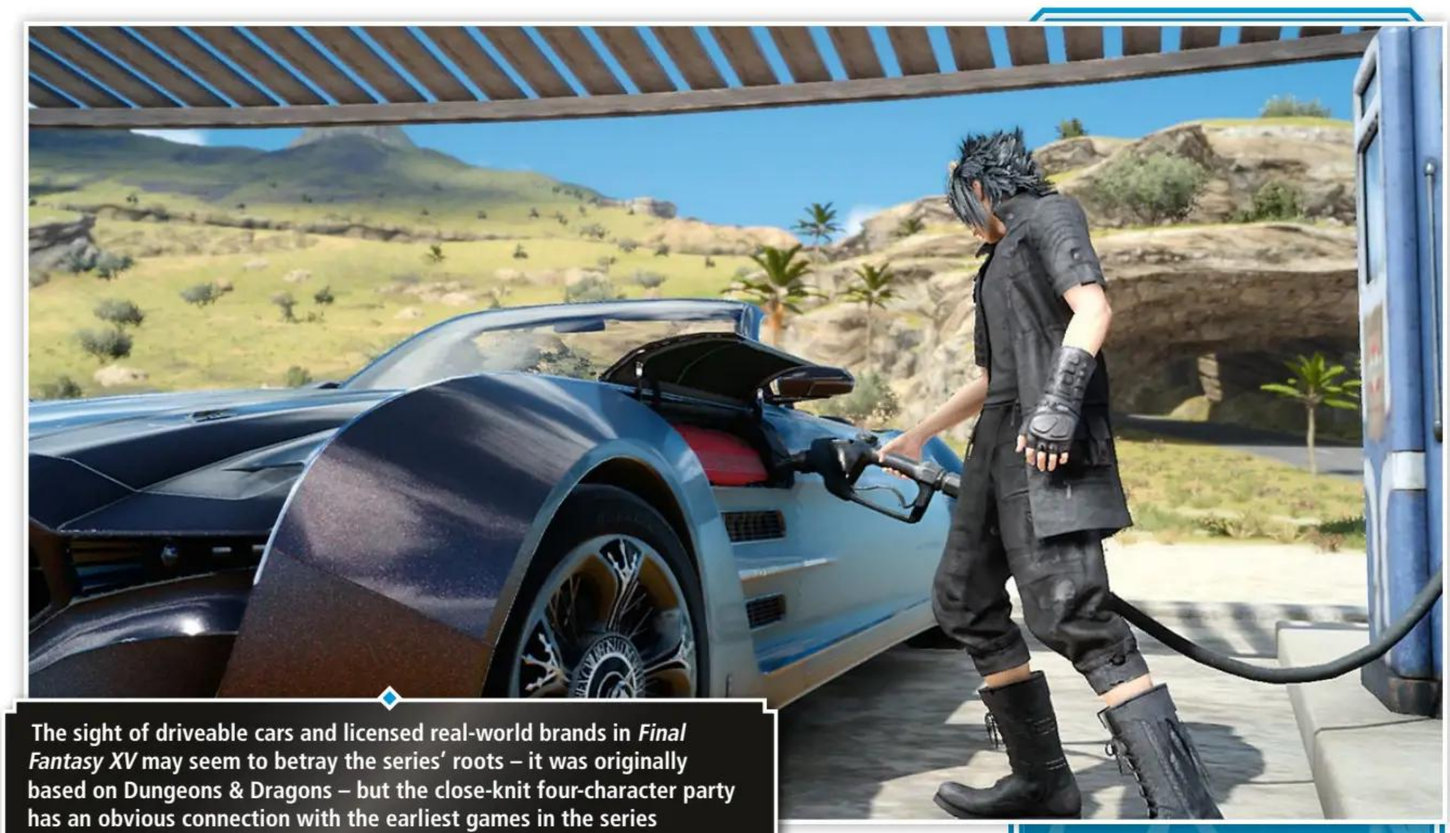
There was a lot of antipathy, because my team didn't want to merge with Tetsuya Nomura's, and they knew about the snags the project had encountered.

It took about six months to reduce resentments and take control. Creating a team where we could all work together and be on the same page when we entered the pre-production stage for *Final Fantasy XV* was crucial, so I paid a lot of attention to making sure the team integrated well and worked together. I even gave a motivational speech.

We pulled a number of different ideas for the final form the game might take, and we split the department up into several teams, and they all came up with ideas that we put together and then presented to each other. The two core concepts that came out of that were the idea of comrades, and the idea of a journey. That helped us work out the systems and structures of the game. Then we split into different teams and worked on different mock-ups. It was a very useful period actually, because not only was it a team-building exercise

in itself, but it also helped focus the direction of the project.

At the start, I had quite a top-down style of management to get things back on track. Someone had to make firm decisions, otherwise people would have this very fuzzy understanding of where we were headed. But as the project started getting on track and gaining momentum, we moved into a secondary phase where individual sub-teams could have their own vision and work a bit more autonomously. There was a definite shift in style there.



The sight of driveable cars and licensed real-world brands in *Final Fantasy XV* may seem to betray the series' roots – it was originally based on Dungeons & Dragons – but the close-knit four-character party has an obvious connection with the earliest games in the series

Shimomura There were some clear differences between the two directors. With Nomura it took much longer to get the okay on a new piece of music. He would think very deeply about the piece, and often request changes. But once he told me that he was happy with a piece there would be almost no changes thereafter. Tabata, by contrast, often gave the green light very quickly, but would then require more and more changes at a later date. They have different ways of working that reflect their personalities; both present their distinctive challenges.

Sakaguchi After moving away from Square Enix there was a need to remove my influence from the *Final Fantasy* series for various reasons. I'd started a new studio with Mistwalker, and there was a risk people would want to follow me from Square. As such, the CEO at the time wanted to remove any influence I had from the series. There was a long period where I stayed away. That changed with the arrival of the new CEO, Yosuke Matsuda. His thinking is different. He acknowledges that I am the creator and the originator of *Final Fantasy* and could see that, from a promotional point of view, it would be good to have me on board again to send a positive message. That was about the time *Final Fantasy XV* was in development. Masuda introduced me to the director, Tabata, and we had dinner together. It was the first time we'd met.

Tabata We spoke at length and Sakaguchi had some critical points to bring up, which he shared. He always has a lot more to say when he's drunk. I have to take him out properly if I really want to get some information out of him.

Sakaguchi He said to me that night: "In my team we believe that a *Final Fantasy* game is a place to try new things." This guy, I thought to myself, he says some good things. Maybe I can get on board with him?

> "The period of trying to fix the game's issues went on way too long"
>
> **Hajime Tabata**

Tabata At that first meeting Sakaguchi told me that I could ask him anything I wanted. So I said: "How much money do you have?" And he replied: "You can ask me anything but that."

Sakaguchi So you see, while there was a long dark period, I am now allowed to talk pretty freely to *Final Fantasy* people. When I

Hajime Tabata held consultations with fans throughout the development process of *Final Fantasy XV* to ensure that the game did not alienate its core audience with its new, sometimes daring diversions

Yoko Shimomura

Yoko Shimomura graduated from the Osaka College of Music in 1988 and was offered a job as a piano teacher in a local music store. An avid player of videogames, before accepting the job, Shimomura sent some of her compositions to Capcom, which offered her a job as a composer. At Capcom Shimomura composed the music for 16 games including, most famously, *Street Fighter II*. In 1993 she applied for a job at Square, not only because of the company's reputation for making RPGs, which she loved, but also because she didn't know anyone there, so she could never be accused of having simply benefited from nepotism. Shimomura worked at Square for nine years, before going freelance. Her first work on a *Final Fantasy* game was on *Final Fantasy Versus XIII*, the troubled project that eventually was turned into *Final Fantasy XV*.

☞ set off on my own path, *Final Fantasy* seemed to follow me around; it almost felt like a burden. But I've been making games away from Square for about 15 years and it's better now. It's a little like if your daughter gets married to a man you really can't stand. And then they have a grandson together and he's cute and it brings you back together. That's kind of how I feel about *Final Fantasy* now.

> "Final Fantasy seemed to follow me around; it's almost a burden"
>
> **Hironobu Sakaguchi**

Tabata One of the big things in doing a project like this — a numbered *Final Fantasy* game, such a big part of the overall business strategy for the company — is that you really do come to realise how all the different departments in the company are supporting a project. People who aren't involved at all in the actual development of the game, how they're involved was something that really struck me.

Also, the way that the difficulty level of developing a project just expands so rapidly when it becomes a project of that level. To meet the needs of the fans, and give them what they want, is always going to be a hard thing, whatever level you're working at. But when you're moving onto the higher technical level, the scope of the project becomes so much more difficult. It's as if you're making a toy rocket, for example, and then moving on to make a much more professional, proper rocket — the technology, the level of detail and design that is involved in that, is just so much higher.

I had dinner with Naoki Yoshida, the director of *Final Fantasy XIV*, a little while back, and we were discussing our experiences of our two respective projects. What we both came to agree on very quickly, and a dilemma that both myself and he seemed to have, was how a lot of people in the company don't seem to understand how hard making a top-level triple-A game using current technology is. We really were talking about the best way to get more people in the company to understand that.

Hashimoto I trust these new guys. It's far better to have them in charge rather than the older generation. I know that now the series is in safe hands. I have done nine games in the *Final Fantasy* series, and there have been ups and downs, but I'm very happy that we have made so many games under my watch.

Amano Even after Sakaguchi left, Square Enix continued. And looking at the series after his departure, I can still sense this ongoing energy. I think that comes from the next generation: those people who grew up playing *Final Fantasy* are now the people who are creating it. That power, and that continuing love, imbues this tradition with new energy.

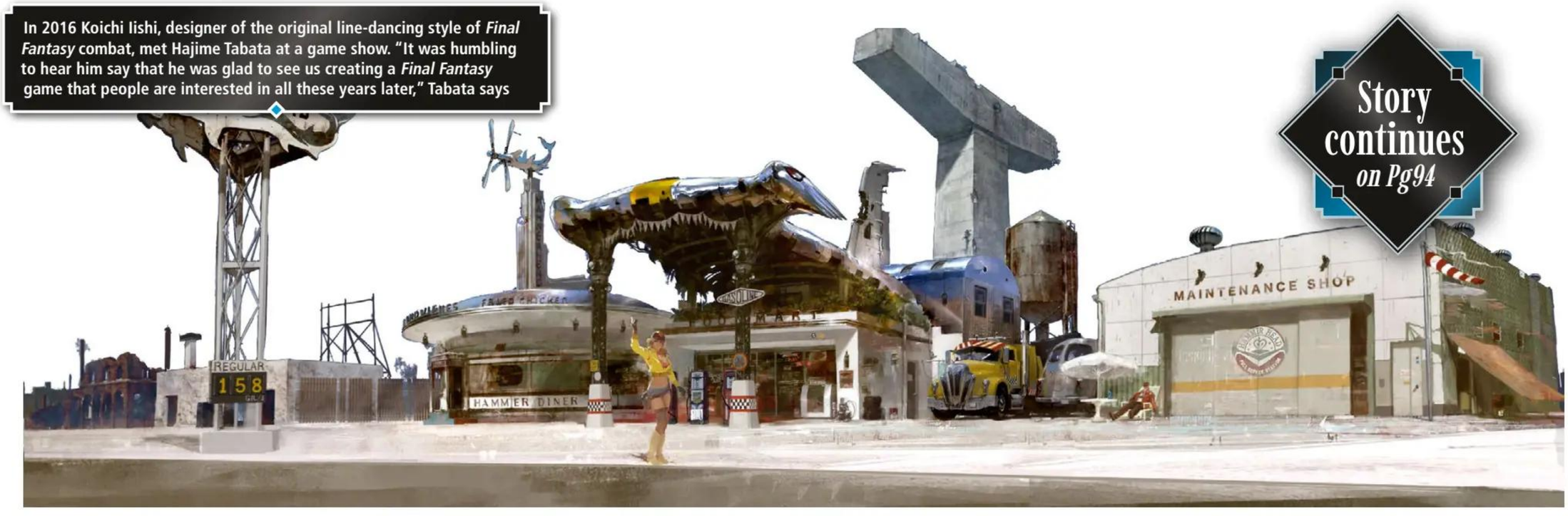
Uematsu I really like what the new composers on the series are doing. Hitoshi Sakimoto, Yoko Shimomura; they are such a good fit, especially for the more modern games. These are supremely high-quality musicians, and have an approach that works much better than what I could produce.

I'm so grateful for my work with Square, though. Thinking back, as someone who never studied music formally, it's almost like Square Enix was my music school. They gave me 20 years where I could learn to play music and how to compose. What's more, I didn't have to pay any tuition fees.

Sakaguchi Nobuo and I often talk about what might have been different if we had taken a different direction with the seventh game and, instead of going down a more realistic route, had continued in the classic style. How might it have evolved and, crucially, what might have been retained that, I think, was lost somewhere in the later games? It's not about one approach being better than the other. It's about the style of play. It's just different. In the old 2D *Final Fantasy* games you'd look in every gap and nook and cranny for secrets. In 3D games there doesn't seem to be the same need or desire to explore.

Kitase With the remake of *Final Fantasy VII*, we get a lot of people applying to join the team from other companies. When we talk to these candidates they often say that *Final Fantasy VII* was the game that made them want to join the industry. It's so motivational to hear that. Something we created unlocked this deep desire in other people. Moreover, I can look back on my career and see the way in which the *Final Fantasy* games are linked to people's personal history and experiences. People associate different games with different moments in their lives. Making that impact on the culture is astonishing to me.

Sakaguchi Every time we made a *Final Fantasy* game, we'd all get together and review the project in a debrief meeting. Together we'd watch the game's ending and toast champagne. We had all put so much energy into this thing, so it was an emotional moment. I remember every single one of those closing parties, and that extraordinary feeling of having made something together. That, I will never forget.



In 2016 Koichi Iishi, designer of the original line-dancing style of *Final Fantasy* combat, met Hajime Tabata at a game show. "It was humbling to hear him say that he was glad to see us creating a *Final Fantasy* game that people are interested in all these years later," Tabata says

Story continues on Pg94

FINAL FAN

TASY XIII

Revisiting the most divisive edition of Square Enix's world-beating RPG series

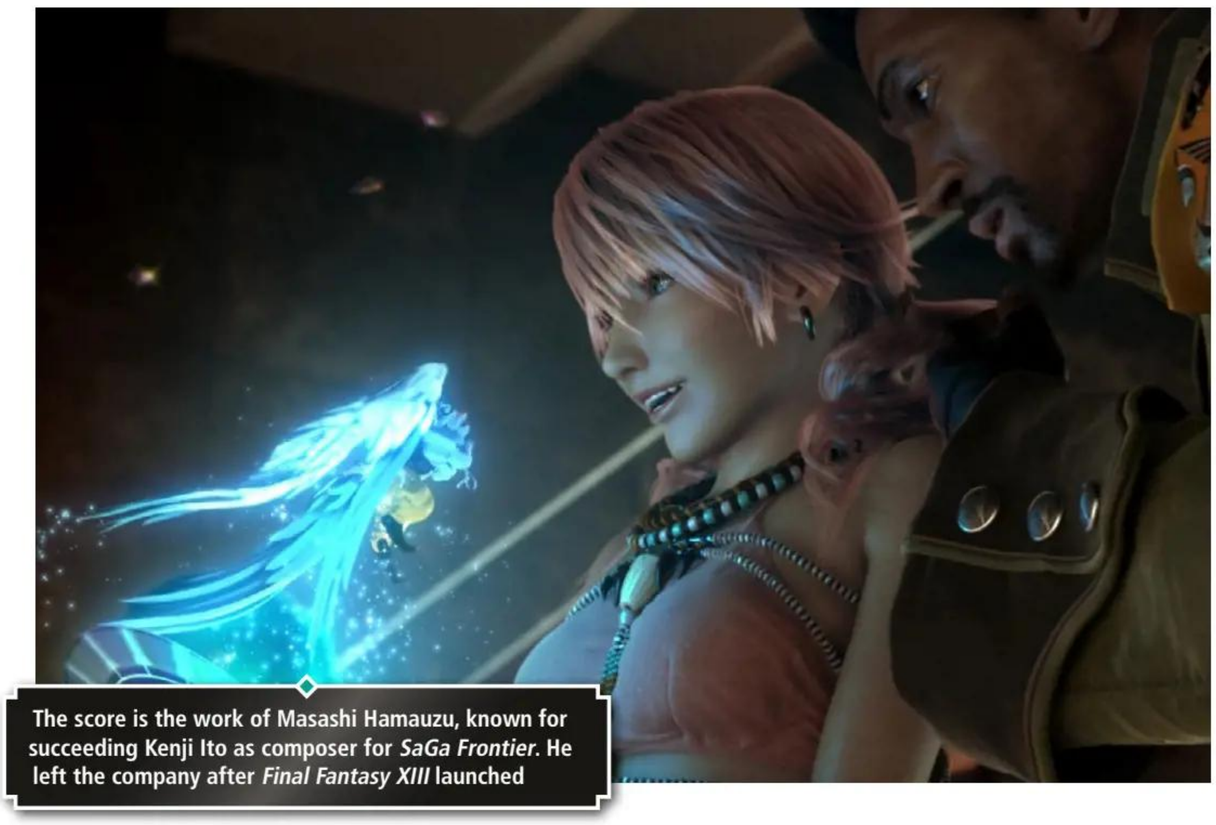
How long does a getaway sequence need to last before it turns into a running joke? *Final Fantasy XIII* is very nearly the punchline, there. A misjudged bid to pump acid into the veins of a famously stately series, it starts with a boss fight on the roof of a train and keeps up that intensity for 20 hours straight.

There's seldom a moment to breathe as your motley band of fugitives tumbles through the crevices of a mechanical world. The environments, ranging from airship hulls to the whipped-cream contours of a frozen lake, are grander than any previous *Final Fantasy* backdrop, but also far more disposable, quickly lost in the slipstream. There are hidden treasure orbs, some short-lived terrain puzzles and opportunities to flank enemies who are now visible in the field, but for the most part each area is a corridor, always shoving you onward. The interludes of previous *FF*s have been discarded. There's no overworld exploration to drain off the adrenaline after a tough dungeon, no cosy inns with a Moogle out back, just save points that provide access to shopping menus. The game doesn't even make you stop to level up — experience from battle can be spent at any time, and there never seems to be any time to spare.

Much like the setting, the cast are a blur to begin with. *Final Fantasy XIII*'s haste, which in fairness is a nice change from the sleepy premise of the undiscovered world-saver doing chores in a backwater village, sees it dispensing with introductions and doing much of the crucial fleshing-out in flashbacks. It isn't that hard to understand what's happening — and there are chapter summaries in your datalog — but the script's restlessness makes it difficult to care. You feel like you're having the entire plot bellowed at you in a chaotic dressing room, five minutes before curtain-up.

This is a world split between two warring parties, you gather: the quasi-American wilds of Pulse and the jealously defended hollow planetoid of Cocoon. There are gods, the Fal'Cie, who are partial to branding mortals with sigils that confer magical powers while lumping the victim with a Focus quest. Fail to complete your Focus in time, and you'll turn into a monster. Complete it, and you can look forward to a leisurely afterlife as a crystal statue. All the major cast members have these brands, and must tackle their Focus quests alongside personal issues and grievances. They must also stay ahead of Cocoon's security forces, who regard anything Fal'Cie or Pulse-touched as an abomination.

The characters are abrasive at first glance, and certainly don't belong in any halls of fame, but they grow on you as the plot settles into its stride. Handsome lunk Snow — Troy Baker in full cheesecake mode — begins the tale a self-declared hero but gradually learns humility. Vanille is



The score is the work of Masashi Hamauzu, known for succeeding Kenji Ito as composer for *SaGa Frontier*. He left the company after *Final Fantasy XIII* launched

Annoying as it is to be limited to certain party compositions for so much of the plot, this does a good job of teaching you each character's strengths in different contexts

☞ another of the genre's queasily sexualised infants, but her ditziness betrays a mountain of guilt. She's at her most charismatic when paired with weary blaxploitation dad Sazh, the only cast member who is likeable from the get-go. Puny Hope is an absolute bore initially, seething with stifled resentment toward Snow, but once he obtains a degree of closure he's surprisingly huggable.

Really, though, it's all about the big sisters of the group — Fang, a staff-wielding Australian who exists to take everybody down a peg, and, of course, poster-girl Lightning, a gloomy warrior with the requisite over-designed sword. Lightning's goal for much of the game is simply to rescue her sister, Serah, and if she experiences the occasional crisis of conscience, there's nothing here on par with the legendary Tidus laughing scene in *Final Fantasy X*. She has the thousand-yard-stare and italicised hairdo of a Squall Leonhart but rather less of his sulkiness and indecision. Stand in her way, and she'll cut you off with a look or a fist to the face (Snow generally gets the worst of it). The character's coldness isn't always engaging, but her steely demeanour more or less carries the plot through the early stages when Vanille and Hope, especially, are too much to bear.

There's a somewhat entertaining fantasy melodrama somewhere in *Final Fantasy XIII*, then, but it's poorly served for being fired at you out of a Gatling gun. The unrelenting pace frequently borders on farce: one critical story branch occurs because Sazh is too exhausted to keep running. The curious thing about *Final Fantasy XIII*, however, is that in other respects it is desperately sluggish. Partly, that's because when every area is a violently decorated corridor, every beat a question of fight-or-flight, it's hard to feel like you're really going anywhere. But mainly, it's because the game takes its sweet time teaching you about its deceptively mindless-looking battle system.

> "When every area is a violently decorated corridor, it's hard to feel like you're really going anywhere"

Some enemies have limited fields of view, allowing you to ambush them and boost their Stagger bars at a battle's outset

Square Enix's caution is easy to understand: this is one of the series' riskiest departures, poised between the classic Active Time Battle formula, the if/then combat programming of *Final Fantasy XII* and the balletic pub brawls of *Final Fantasy XV*. But the trepidation hurts the game during the opening third, as you contend with a system that seems hell-bent on taking away everything you know. You only control one character at a time, with up to two allies attacking, casting spells and healing automatically. You can pick your character's moves, stacking them like MMO commands before your ATB bar fills, but given the speed of encounters, it's more effective to let the (almost too-capable) autobattle AI choose targets and actions for you.

The whole party's abilities are, moreover, infuriatingly split between six ability suites, or Paradigms, which can be shuffled together to create various sets of roles. Where *Final Fantasy XII* saw you labouring to create Gambits equal to anything the game might throw at you, no single set of Paradigms will get you through every situation. If you want to heal, for example, you'll need to switch mid-encounter to a set such as Double Dose which includes healing spells, which may mean that

Unlucky number

The *Final Fantasy* series is no stranger to development setbacks, and *Final Fantasy XIII* had its fair share. Originally a PS3 exclusive, the game was delayed by the shift to multiplatform and problems with its Crystal Tools engine, which became the foundation for a number of other games. A sibling project, *Final Fantasy Versus XIII*, would eventually become *Final Fantasy XV*. The game arrived too late in the console generation to wow, but remains a strikingly handsome experience. In particular, it is the first *Final Fantasy* in which characters move and act as fluidly and believably in combat and in-engine dialogue as in the expected highly polished cutscenes.

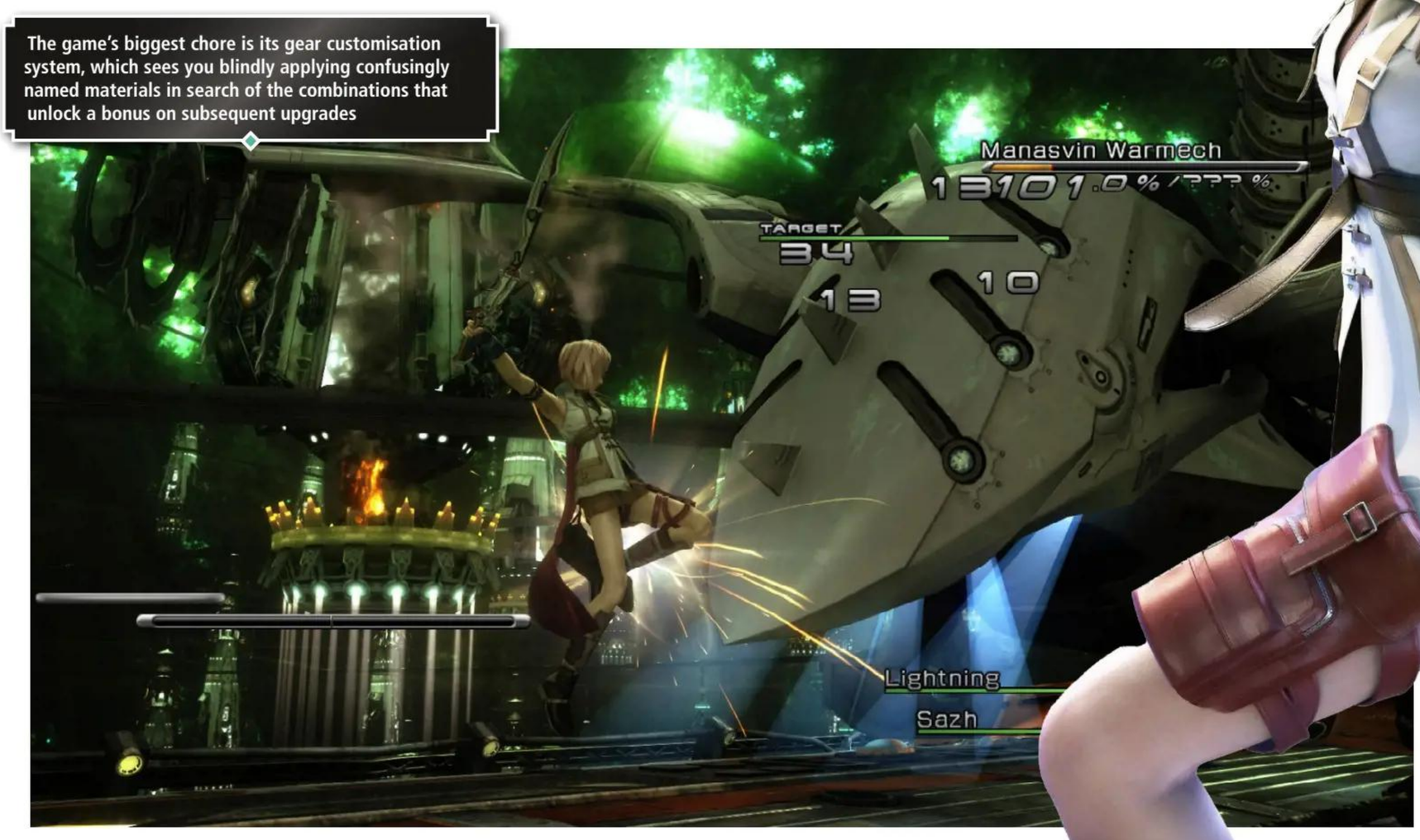
attack-oriented characters such as Sazh are left twiddling their thumbs. All this reflects battle system director Toshiro Tsuchida's desire to strip out distracting minutiae and channel the flamboyance of infamous 2005 movie adaptation *Final Fantasy VII: Advent Children*. The inevitable consequence is that you often feel more like a spectator than a participant.

That feeling eventually dissipates, however. The system opens up as you unlock the abilities each Paradigm contains, experiment with character combinations (by necessity – the campaign routinely splits people up, and doesn't let you choose your line-up until pretty late in) and fetch up against more challenging enemy breeds. One incentive to be calculating is the enemy's Stagger bar. Fill that bar and your foe will take huge damage for a moment or so, but you can only do this using abilities specific to the Ravager paradigm. Stacking Ravager attacks to unbalance enemies is accordingly the most efficient route to victory, and efficiency is *Final Fantasy XIII*'s cardinal virtue. Enemies range from wyverns to robots – the social impasse between the game's worlds is pleasingly conveyed by the presence of tamed Pulse creatures on Cocoon – but your greatest foe is always the encounter clock, with snappier resolutions equalling more points to spend on potent (or at least eye-catching) Eidolon summons. Is it worth putting off healing a near-dead character in order to speed a staggered enemy's demise? Should you waste seconds shielding and empowering your party at the outset, or go for broke?

As the system's depths reveal themselves, the preconceptions created by previous *Final Fantasy* games begin to shift. You realise, on the one hand, that many of the old ATB system's best qualities are present and correct. Boss battles, for instance, still rest on knowing exactly when to oscillate from full assault to healing, buffing or debuffing, with last-ditch AOE attacks to worry about once the boss is on the ropes. On the other hand, you realise that much of what made previous *FF* games irritating has been elegantly minimised.

You can set up the same match-winning plays without worrying about many of the details. The absence of micro-management makes repeated battles against the same enemy types less boring. Character health is restored between scraps, which means you spend less of the game in menus keeping everybody upright. It's a compromise, without doubt – *Final Fantasy XIII*'s best battles can't match the finest moments of the PS1 games, where the universe may live or die on a single command. But it's a pleasure to witness those venerable core concepts buckle and diverge according to a wholly different understanding of what an encounter should be.

Final Fantasy XIII attracted damning verdicts at release – *Edge*'s 5 was hardly the exception – but Square Enix evidently felt it was onto something. The game has spawned two sequels, one a *Final Fantasy* spin on *The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask*, and Lightning has guest-starred in other games. She has also broken into the fashion industry, doing 'photoshoots' for Louis Vuitton. All of which is cause for rueful laughter, but *Final Fantasy XIII* isn't the joke it may seem when you realise you're still reading tutorial windows 15 hours in. It's fascinating to trace its eccentricities forward into *Final Fantasy XV* and, indeed, the *Final Fantasy VII* remake, as this series continues its headlong flight from whoever and whatever it used to be.



The game's biggest chore is its gear customisation system, which sees you blindly applying confusingly named materials in search of the combinations that unlock a bonus on subsequent upgrades

FINAL FAN

How the MMO went from Square Enix's most catastrophic failure to the series' most successful entry

TASY XIV

When you think of *Final Fantasy*, you're probably thinking of the grand single-player epics that grip you with their characters and stories and also eventually come to an end before you move on to the next, with a completely new world. So it may surprise you that arguably the most popular entry in the series to date is *Final Fantasy XIV*, which does the opposite. It's an MMORPG, in the vein of *World of Warcraft*, where you're connecting with players from around the world to take on multiple story arcs and dungeons that continue to expand over time, all while your own custom character, the Warrior of Light, continues to grow. Yet despite its popularity, it was also the game that almost permanently tarnished the series.

FFXIV was the second MMO in the series' history, following *FFXI* almost a decade earlier, and even had some of the same staff members working on it. But while the former was relatively successful as an early example of online RPGs in the console space, *FFXIV* was a worst-case-scenario disaster. There are many reasons behind why the original *FFXIV* failed so hard, but one factor can be attributed to what's usually one of the series' strengths: the graphics. *Final Fantasy* games have always been known for being beautiful – more so with the 3D games – from pre-rendered cinematics to even more realistic and detailed visuals. On the surface, *FFXIV* looked like the most graphically gorgeous MMO compared to the low-poly efforts of *World of Warcraft*, but that came at the horrible expense of other resources required to actually run an MMO with large-scale worlds and a large number of players at the same time.

As for those who had to endure the experience of playing it, there was a whole dirty laundry list of problems, from daily server crashes to a terrible user interface, not to mention a constant battle with bugs and glitches more than any actual in-game battles, where every attack also required a manual input. It hadn't helped that the development team were also basing their experience solely on *FFXI* rather than how MMOs had evolved on PC in the intervening years. The critical planning when it released on PC in 2010 was so bad that it risked irrevocably damaging the reputations of Square Enix and *Final Fantasy*.

In came its saviour in the form of Naoki Yoshida, who would take over as the game's producer and director. He was also clearly more adept for the task at hand as an experienced fan of MMOs like *Ultima Online*, *EverQuest* and *Warhammer Online*. At the time, he had also been the chief planner on the company's other MMO, *Dragon Quest X*, which released in 2012, exclusively in Japan.

Of all the villains you face, Zenos is probably the most formidable, appearing in three of *FFXIV*'s expansions

Salvaging *FFXIV* would require restoring trust in the community. These included regular communications from Yoshida (who would also become more affectionately known as 'Yoshi-P') called 'Letters from the Producer', which have since also taken the form of live streams, providing more transparency in the development process, design changes and responding to player feedback.

> "That recovery would be the 2.0 version of *FFXIV*, which first released on PC and PS3 in 2013"

However, given how broken the game's design foundations were, future patches would not be sufficient, so the real mission would involve rebuilding *FFXIV* entirely from scratch with a new engine, which would

Trust in me

Making the main scenario a single-player affair

Even though *FFXIV* is designed for playing with others, it's still possible to play by yourself. While initially this meant the most hardcore players soloing tough bosses, the release of *Shadowbringers* introduced the Duty Support, where you can opt to run a Duty with AI-controlled companions. As you can play with characters also involved in the story, such as fellow Scions, it arguably makes more canonical sense than matching up with other Warriors of Light from their own respective adventures. The unique flavour text offered by those party members is especially enticing for fans who may have run the same dungeons countless times before. There's also a Trust mode where you can bring in other allies who may not be part of the specific story, but can also be levelled up.

While it also means you can run a Duty without having to wait for matchmaking, it's also technically more difficult, as death means having to restart from the last checkpoint without the opportunity for a support companion to revive you. Playing a dungeon for the first time this way is thus far from ideal, and perhaps why this was only available in *Shadowbringers* after a Duty had already been completed once. Although initially only implemented for main-scenario dungeons from *Shadowbringers*, later patches have since implemented the Trust system into earlier chapters so that now almost all of *FFXIV*'s main story content can be soloed.

☞ necessitate shutting down the old game's server. This was even written into the canon of the game's realm of Eorzea, which the primal Bahamut engulfs in fire. Your warrior is sent into a time rift, returning five years later when Eorzea has fully recovered.

That recovery would be the 2.0 version of *FFXIV*, which first released on PC and PS3 in 2013, fittingly given the subtitle *A Realm Reborn*. Everything had been overhauled, from server infrastructure that catered for different regions to gameplay that was also optimised for controllers. Newcomers had more choice on the kind of Warrior of Light they wanted to be, with new races available, such as the dragon-like Au Ra and rabbit-like Viera – the latter initially just female. Rather more importantly, with the sound fundamentals of what was expected of an MMO in place, there was actually substantial gameplay and story content to play.

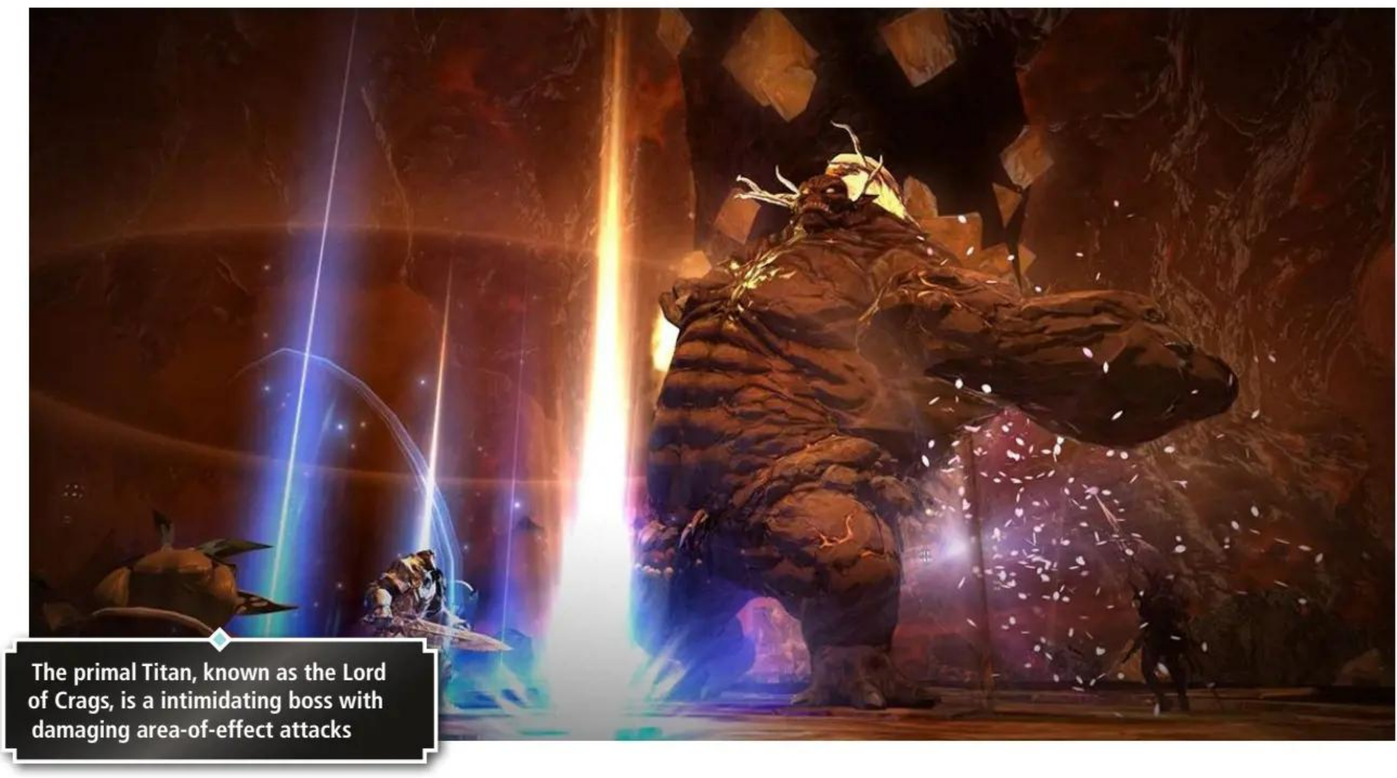
Whether you choose to begin your adventure in the forest of Gridania, the trade-based desert city of Ul'dah or the port city of Limsa Lominsa, the Warrior of Light eventually joins the ranks of the Scions of the Seventh Dawn, a secret organisation investigating and fighting those who threaten Eorzea, from the summoning of powerful primals, like Titan or Garuda, to the shadowy workings of the mysterious masked and robed Ascians, as well as the oppressive might of the Garlean Empire.

While set in a large, persistent world with players logging into specific servers (mostly recommended to ones tailored to their region), the story could be said to function just like a single-player *Final Fantasy*, where interactions and quests instance you into preset cutscenes and challenges. When you do party up with other players, usually with a group of four, these would also be instanced dungeons called Duties, each with its own bespoke designs, but involving fighting against hordes of enemies and minibosses, culminating with a boss with loot that includes new gear and items that you'd also have to roll between your allies in the hopes of getting. Challenges also escalate, such as bigger bosses in Trials that require eight players, or the tough endgame raids that can consist of up to 24 players split into three groups.

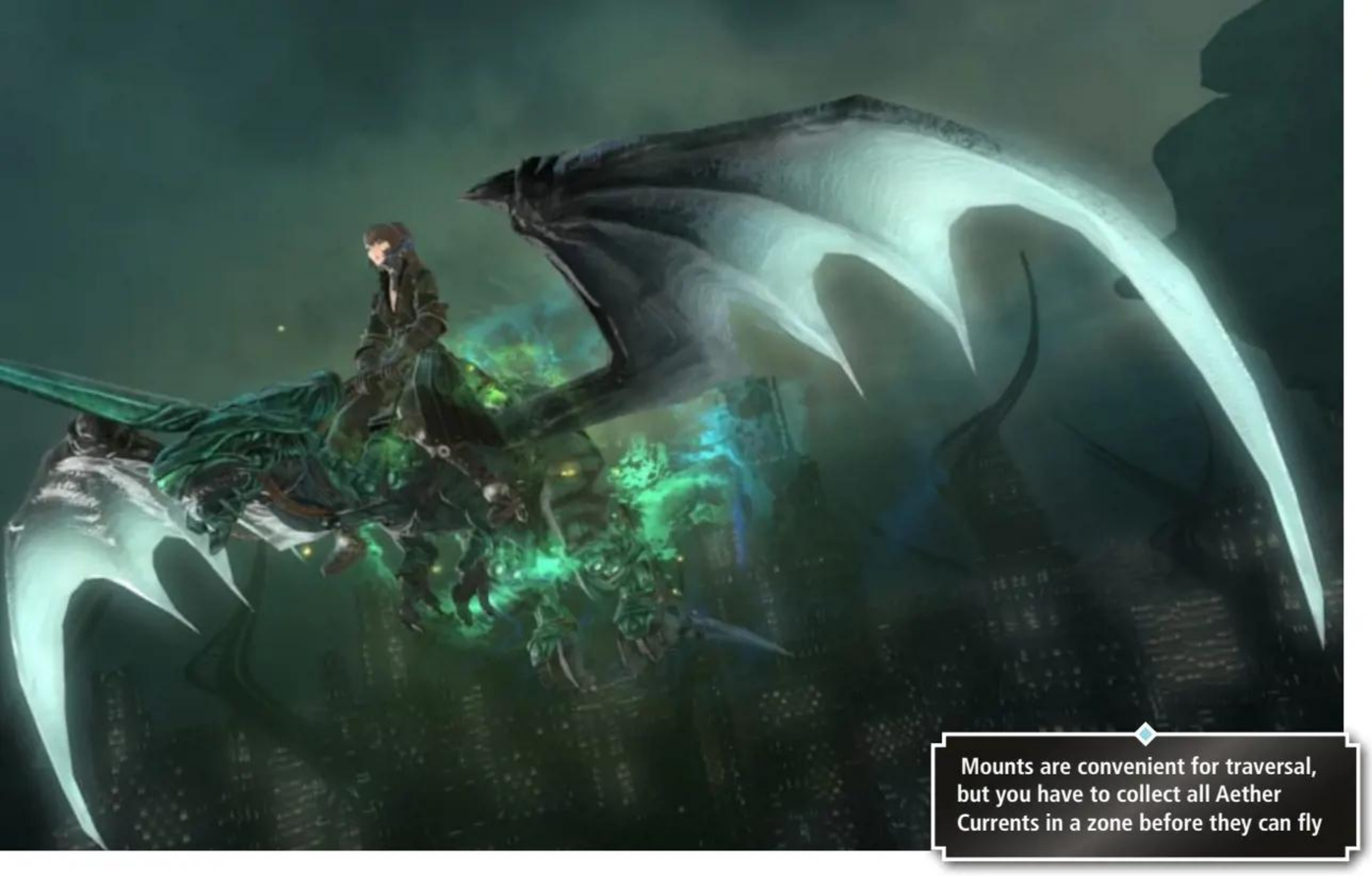
You can play with friends, make new ones, as well as join guilds called Free Companies, but even newcomers can still enjoy the content thanks to the Duty Finder system, which doesn't just act as a matchmaker but also enforces a player cap so you're not playing with overlevelled players who just steamroll ahead. Having daily and weekly incentives also means that veteran players do happily take part in these while ensuring new players won't be waiting ages for a party to form. Even when not partied up, shared world events called Full Active Time Events (FATEs) allow other players to fight monsters at the same time.

Those really up for the challenge and glory can even participate in team-based PvP battles. Crystalline Conflict is your standard 5v5 tug-of-war arena. And on the grand scale is military exercise. Frontline consists of three teams of 24, for a total of 72 players, duking it out on the battlefield. Meanwhile, the 24v24 Rival Wings is a lot like a MOBA, with each side split into three groups, each tackling a lane, joining together to destroy the opposing team's tower.

You can also learn different job classes, each with their own evolving questlines that unlock new skills to map to your hotbars. Changing between jobs is also easy – it's simply a case of equipping the relevant gear for that job. Each does have its own levelling, but it's not uncommon for players to experiment with multiple jobs or even take on different roles, such as the tank who attracts enemy aggro and is usually the leader of the pack, the trigger-happy DPS, whether melee, ranged or with magic, and the all-important support who ensure the party stays alive.



The primal Titan, known as the Lord of Crags, is a intimidating boss with damaging area-of-effect attacks



Mounts are convenient for traversal, but you have to collect all Aether Currents in a zone before they can fly

The original *FFXIV* was quite the looker, but ugly to play

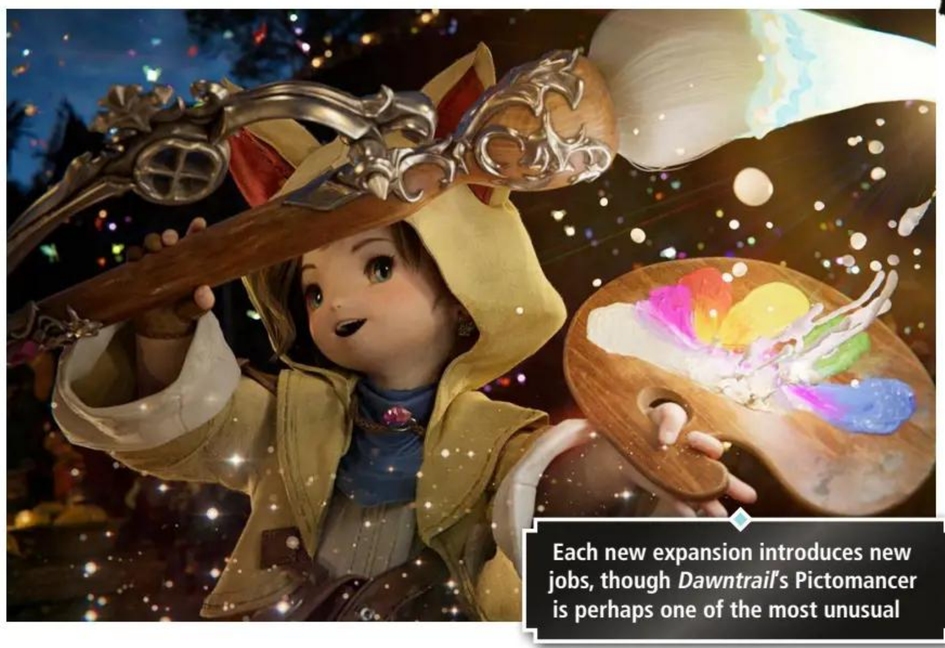
That of course only scratches the surface of what you can do in *FFXIV*. You can also take on gathering or crafting jobs, which also connect with one another, such as mining resources needed to fashion unique gear. Some players even do these jobs for profit, contributing to the game's economy, where high-level materials and gear turn up on market boards. Or head to the Gold Saucer to race on Chocobos or get your glamour on creating a transmog outfit before strutting your stuff at the weekly Fashion Report. Some communities can even get more creative outside of the game's own structures with their own specialised role-playing groups, or it just becomes a regular hangout spot for friends — even better if you have a house with your own room to decorate.

FFXIV's design is what's referred to as a theme park MMO, just like *World of Warcraft*'s, where the story and its progression has largely been set out for players to enjoy, compared to the sandbox MMOs of *Ultima Online* and *EVE Online* that offer extensive player freedom to the point where pivotal in-game lore is influenced and affected by those playing it. It's also fair to say that *FFXIV* is very much a *Final Fantasy* theme park, where some dungeons and boss designs are deliberate callbacks to the series' past.

There's even quests that bring in other parts of the wider universe, such as ones based on the story and characters from *FFXI*, or a storyline inspired by the setting of Ivalice from *Final Fantasy Tactics* and *Final Fantasy XII* (with the writer and director of those games, Yasumi Matsuno, also credited as a guest creator). More recently, a quest even pulled in Clive Rosfield, protagonist of *Final Fantasy XVI*, with his loyal wolf Torgal rewarded as a mount when completed. That's without going into countless other crossover collaborations from other game franchises that all somehow make weird and wonderful sense, from *Monster Hunter* and *Nier* to *Fall Guys*.

In other words, it really has been a miraculous recovery for a game that initially turned up dead on arrival. But from its revival under Yoshida's leadership, *FFXIV* has only grown from strength to strength, with each expansion weaving a more gripping and emotional narrative than the last. With 30 million registered players as of 2024, the game continues to reach more players across generations, having finally come to Xbox, while a mobile version is also due.

As the future of the mainline series continues evolving, *FFXIV*'s light will surely still be shining bright for many years to come.



Each new expansion introduces new jobs, though *Dawntrail*'s Pictomancer is perhaps one of the most unusual

Forzea Expanded

FFXIV's expansions since A Realm Reborn

Heavensward

The first expansion takes the Warrior of Light, a fugitive after being falsely accused of murder, to the snowy climate of Ishgard, where they become embroiled in a thousand-year conflict called the Dragonsong War. Fittingly, it also introduced flying through airships and airborne mounts.

Stormblood

A new dimension to the Garlean conflict is presented in *Stormblood* as you join a resistance to liberate Doma, a kingdom based on Far Eastern culture, which also introduces the samurai job. The region's acting viceroy Yotsuyu is a wicked and cruel villain but with her own harrowing past.

Shadowbringers

The plot thickens as you get stranded in the First, a post-apocalyptic parallel dimension where light can be equally destructive – the only way to fight it is to become the Warrior of Dark. You form an uneasy alliance with Emet-Selch, a complex villain fans would call their problematic favourite.

Endwalker

The big bads are at their most nihilistic as Zenos, the Garlean emperor's son gone mad, and the Ascian Fandaniel seek to bring about the Final Days. Can a trip to the secluded nation of Sharlayan and the Moon hold the key to preventing this? This epic expansion also concludes game's Hydaelyn-Zodiark arc.

Dawntrail

A new arc for *FFXIV* feels like a holiday as you sail to the tropical continent of Tural, becoming involved in a royal tournament to determine the region's next leader. Besides new jobs, this expansion also coincided with its first graphical update since *A Realm Reborn* over a decade ago.

FINAL FA

NTASY XV

Back in 2016, we spent 40 hours on the road with Final Fantasy's lavish, troubled reinvention

Most kingdoms, even those built in videogames, are founded on some kind of violence, usually seeded in disagreements over the rules, boundaries and leadership, finally resolved by a political or military show of strength. *Final Fantasy XV*'s backstory is more bloodied than most. Here is a game that, during the course of its decade-long development, has endured overthrows in name, direction and governance. *Final Fantasy* is a series that thrives on reinvention, mixing familiar elements — the orphan protagonists, the crystal McGuffins, the rambling landscapes, the towering chickens, the airship silhouetted in the sky — in novel ways. *Final Fantasy XV* is, however, something else: a game built from the fragments, not only of its series, but also of past selves.

The character of the laconic young prince Noctis, his entourage and destiny, as well as his combat abilities (the way he can phase through incoming attacks, or plunge his sword into scenery in order to dangle from a tall building or a tree, surveying the battlefield from this vantage point) was established years ago via lavish CG trailers for *Final Fantasy Versus XIII*. It is on this failed game's shaky foundations that *Final Fantasy XV* is built. That director Hajime Tabata, suddenly promoted from steering minor productions to captaining the company's flagship title, has managed to build any sense of cohesion within these stifling constraints, immovably established in the game's troubled past, is extraordinary.

Not that the current team hasn't brought grand ideas and novelties of its own. As the open-world genre continues to homogenise, gradually refining *Grand Theft Auto*'s definitive template with tinkering modifications, these games are increasingly distinguished not by theme or geography (there's little difference between *Assassin's Creed*'s historic Italy and *The Division*'s futuristic New York, when you get down to it), but by the way in which you move through the world: by foot, by car, by flight or something else entirely. Most designers opt to remove friction, allowing us to traverse the world either through scenery-gobbling displays of parkour or, in Batman's case, elegant, tower-scraping swoops and dives. *Final Fantasy XV* takes an unorthodox approach, embracing all the niggles and micro-dramas of a cross-country road trip in a packed car.

It is the eve of Noctis's wedding and rather than visit a seaside town for some beers and a strip club, the heir-to-be and his three closest friends and bodyguards, Prompto, Gladiolus and Ignis, instead opt to take to the open road. It's a sightseeing-cum-camping tour, although it's not long before the journey is interrupted by micro-errands issued by the hick locals, and macro-news from the capital they left behind.

The Regalia, as the prince's luxurious vehicle is known, may be muscular and spacious, but it needs refuelling just like any other of the oddly '50s-style cars on Lucis's roads. Run out of gas in the desert and you'll need to push the Regalia to the nearest petrol station at a painfully slow pace or, if you're feeling flush, pay to have it towed. This is the closest a videogame has come to replicating not only the drama of a road-trip movie (even if, in combining the landscape and drawl of the American South with the tousled hair and all-black get-up of Noctis and his crew, it sometimes looks like the main cast of *Spinal Tap* has wandered into the set of *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*), but also the tedium of a lingering car journey.

> "That director Hajime Tabata has managed to build any sense of cohesion within these stifling constraints is extraordinary"

Hitting the road with your friends isn't all its cracked up to be in *FFXV*

Noctis and his friends bicker and sweat. They feel travelsick after reading a book in the back seat for too long. You'll grow bored of your music collection. They have to slam on the brakes whenever a herd of fantastical deer cross the road ahead. And while most designers of other open-world games work to make the journey as interesting as possible, the Regalia is unable to travel offroad. While you can take the wheel yourself, you'll eventually opt to let Ignis, the sensible patriarch of the group, drive you between quests, while sitting back to enjoy the expansive views or, more likely, to check your phone.

At the end of each day you're free to continue busying about Lucis's roads, but as high-level monsters haunt these byways, you're safer checking into a motel. The game's designers capitalise on the need to seek a bed each night. The experience you earn in battle or by completing tasks is held in a pot and only banked and applied to your squad once you lay down your head, either by setting up a tent at one of the many camping spots around the world of Eos or by paying to stay at a hotel. The quality of the establishment at which you stay will dictate the size of a multiplier that's applied to your experience. Draw into a dingy caravan park and, while you'll save money, you could be losing out on thousands of bonus points that you'd earn simply by paying a bit more to stay at a well-to-do health spa or luxurious city hotel.

These rhythms of travel and rest are, at first, infuriatingly inconvenient — especially when you have to watch a 15-second cutscene every time you refill the car. The game offers a Google Maps-style estimated journey time between quest markers and, while these never last longer than ten minutes, the relatively short days and the perilous nights mean that you need to plan your excursions carefully. Often you'll find yourself on the trail of some monster as part of a freelance assignment (issued exclusively and inexplicably by the front-of-house staff at the game's various restaurants) when night falls, and forced to retreat back to the nearest trailer park. The

Make sure you don't run out of gas or you'll need to push the Regalia to the nearest petrol station

Elemency, My Dear Watson

Magic is far less important in the game than in previous instalments in the series, although it works in arguably a much more interesting way. You must craft spells one by one by harvesting elemental energy from natural springs around Eos. Once collected, you can mix and match the elements to create different kinds of spells with different levels of potency. These must be equipped like a weapon and, as they only come in batches of three, are hugely powerful. Spells also attack indiscriminately. Any allies caught in the blast, which can set fire to an entire area of the battlefield, will be similarly wounded.

FFXV's story isn't as strong as some of the earlier games in the series, while it also struggles to convey emotion at times

Two Square Meals

Ignis is the group's cook. Each time you camp in the wild, you can choose a meal for him to cook for everyone, which imbues each team member with temporary status effects for the next ten minutes or so. Each team member has his own favourite recipes too and, when served these meals, his techniques can randomly develop more quickly, or deliver bonus-critical hits while the effects of the meal last.

strangeness of it all is compounded by the aesthetic. You are, essentially, a royal errand boy in a Maserati — a tonal melange exacerbated by the schizophrenic soundtrack (which lunges from country to J-pop to Yoko Shimomura's sweeping orchestral pieces) and its babble of accents, which range in origin from Texas to Boston to Surrey. Allow yourself to adjust to the unusual flow and yield to the wild eccentricity, however, and in this way *Final Fantasy XV* can offer that rarest of blockbuster experiences: originality.

The novelty extends from the game's structure to its action-heavy battle system, offering a dramatic overhaul of Koichi Ishii's line-dancing-style design, which has defined the Japanese RPG for more than three decades. Noctis has the acrobatic offensive ability of a kung-fu film star, including the ability to phase through enemy attacks while the defensive button is held down, and a show-stopping gift of being able to hurl one of his four equipped weapons and instantly warp to wherever it lands. When locked onto an enemy, a blade-warp is turned into an offensive move, known as a warp-strike. The damage caused by a warp-strike increases with distance, encouraging you to whip back and forth into and out of the battle's throng. Noctis can also point-warp to resting locations, usually atop rocks, or pylons. While suspended from a point-warp spot, he slowly recovers health while his MP gauge, which is used to pay for warping and phasing, is instantly replenished. It's a useful tactic, but you'll need to wrestle the camera to find one of these willing warp points first, a difficult task in the middle of a ten-way skirmish.

Noctis will automatically attack enemies for as long as the attack button is held down or until he's interrupted by an enemy strike. If he uses MP into deficit, however, he enters 'Statis', a state in which all you can do is hobble around the battlefield, vulnerably, until one of your three comrades taps you on the shoulder. While dangling from point-warp spots or simply crouching behind cover replenishes your MP, you'll need to supplement these short rests with restorative items in order to keep up the pace of the battle, especially without a healer on the team — a strange and frustrating oversight made even more pronounced when, for a short while partway through the game, one joins the fray.

When in defensive mode Noctis automatically evades attacks using his ghostly phasing. There's no need to time your button presses with Platinum-esque precision, but after successfully defending you can follow up with a parry — a button strike for which there is only a small window, smaller still for more powerful foes. Sometimes the game will prompt you to do so, but it is in fact possible to parry any attack that you successfully dodge.

From the beginning, Noctis is able to equip himself with up to four weapons (switched between using the D-pad) from any weapon class, which include swords, lances, guns and, later, rings. This abundance of weapon options seems, at first, bewildering. In fact, it's not merely to

give you style options, but because you'll need to switch between weapon classes in order to get around an enemy's resistances. If the damage value appears in orange when striking foes, it indicates the enemy is weak to that weapon type. Purple indicates it's resistant to the attacks. If you prefer not to know what you're getting into at the start of each fight, Ignis has the ability to identify an enemy's affinities and weaknesses, giving you the chance to equip Noctis with appropriate weapons before blows are traded.

> "Allow yourself to yield to the wild eccentricity and FFXV can offer that rarest of blockbuster experiences: originality"

While you only control Noctis directly, it's possible to bait your teammates, who fight independently under AI control, into joining up for link strikes by performing parries or blindside attacks (triggered whenever you strike a target from behind) while an ally is nearby. These animated flourishes are fun – occasionally the two characters will momentarily swap weapons for the occasion. However, as the game progresses, their random nature comes to interrupt the flow of your strategy. Beyond link attacks, your three allies each have a unique technique they can perform on command. Prompto, for example, will line up a marksman's shot with his pistol, while Gladio sweeps his broadsword into enemies in great circling motions. A successful strike from one of these techniques opens up the opportunity for Noctis to follow up with a powerful attack of his own.

The battle system works well in small groups of enemies, and is at its best at those times when Noctis is forced to fight alone. As the number of bodies in a skirmish increases, so the complexity scales, and the legibility of what's happening on screen falls. The system comes close to falling apart completely during boss fights, as the camera swivels wildly to keep up with the action, often leaving you giddy and disoriented.

You earn no currency from defeating monsters. The economy is entirely driven by selling the trinkets that you find (displayed as twinkling lights in the environment), or taking on the paid freelance hunting missions. This has the effect of making you seem, despite your royal blood, eternally impoverished. Since the battle system requires a regular intake of consumable items – potions to protect your health bar and elixirs to keep your action gauge filled – you often won't have enough money in the bank to keep up with the latest weapons and armour.

Summons – those mythological, elemental creatures such as Leviathan, Shiva and the rest, typically called forth to provide battle support in the series – are treated not as supporting cameos here but as anchors around which the plot is constructed. Noctis seeks to meet with each in order to gain their power and blessing in his quest to free Lucis from the warring attention of its neighbouring kingdoms and Ardyn, the game's foppish, Kefka-like antagonist. The elevation of these supporting characters – along with series mainstays Cid, Biggs and Wedge – is designed to appeal to fans (every time you turn on the game you're greeted with the message: 'A *Final Fantasy* for fans and first-timers') but it's been done at the expense of a strong and meaningful plot. Kazushige Nojima's story shoots for emotional impact, echoing many of the series' best-loved moments.

Final Fantasy XV received some criticism on release due to its lack of main female characters

Q&A

HAJIME TABATA

DIRECTOR, FINAL FANTASY XV

***Final Fantasy XV*, perhaps more than any other game in the series, is a departure from the format laid down by the early games. How did you decide what of the series' tradition could be thrown out, while maintaining some essential feel of *Final Fantasy*-ness?**
It's not easy to put into words. We certainly didn't try to create a title that just focused on revisiting memories we have from past *Final Fantasy* titles. Rather, we wanted to create the best RPG we could for this time, with the time we were given. The question of how we could retain that essence of *Final Fantasy* within the new formula we came up with came later. Essentially, we wanted to have the base game in place and working, before adding the *Final Fantasy* adornments. That process started with creating the story, then figuring out the best mechanics to serve that story, then finally building out into the universe from there.

The core squad is comprised of four men – something that's never happened in the series before, which has always had a diverse playable cast to appeal to a broad audience. Why only male characters this time?
Firstly, we bring in guest characters throughout the game. They're not necessarily playable, but they do appear within your party at different points throughout the story. In terms of balance, we didn't factor in too much of the traditional *Final Fantasy* balance, because we were focusing on the theme of experiencing the journey, and different events that might happen on a road trip. That kind of road-movie structure works well in terms of bringing in guest characters.

When you took over directorship of the game, you made a lot of changes to the team, promoting some junior staff and demoting certain others from senior positions. What are you looking for in an ideal staff member?
Someone who can find their own goals or objectives when nothing has been set for them or confirmed. It's a challenging game to work on so I was looking for self-starters. People who are competitive work well too. You need people who hate losing, in a way.

Do you still think this reorganisation was the right way to do things?
For sure, it was the right way to move the project forward. We were able to improve upon the overall team's performance, which directly correlates to where we are with the game at this precise moment.

You've talked in the past about '*Final Fantasy* disease', referring to complacency with people in the company, combined with an unwillingness to be daring and to take creative risks. Has that attitude, which you saw as poisonous, changed now?
There's been a major shift in everyone's mentality. Especially in terms of what we think are given in terms of what a *Final Fantasy* is supposed to be. We've been able to examine the various elements and critique them, looking at them objectively. You can only do that when you let go of complacency. Earlier this year I heard Eiji Aonuma talking about *Zelda*. He said that, with the new game, they want to revisit and redefine what everyone believes to be standard for the series. That attitude reflects my posture towards *Final Fantasy XV*. We're not basing the development on what traditionally has to be in there, but rather what is best for the player in any particular situation within the game.

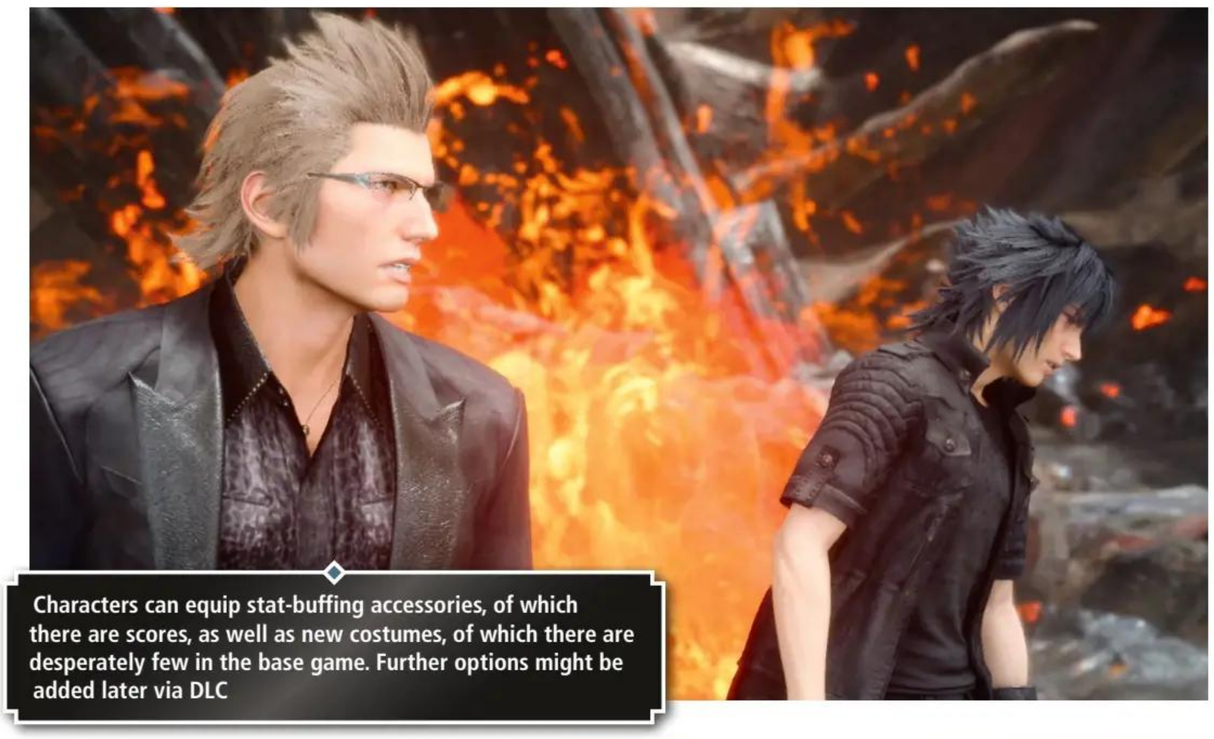
Prior to this major project, you worked with more modest-sized teams, budgets and responsibilities. How have you coped with the shift to blockbuster development, and particularly the pressure of finishing such an expensive and long-running project?
Prior to *Final Fantasy XV* my projects were indeed all significantly smaller, not only in terms of the size of the teams involved, but also in terms of the potential impact that the game's success or failure could have on the company. For one thing, not just the past year, but ever since I started working on this game, I started to realise that it's not just one title that we're creating here. A numbered *Final Fantasy* title involves a huge number of departments who pull together to make it a success. That increases the pressure exponentially. When I asked if we could delay the launch of the game, I had a fresh realisation: this kind of decision doesn't just impact our company. There are also the platform owners, the retailers and all of these other groups and organisations. Even competitors who are figuring out when best to schedule their activities are impacted.

You've worked on games of all sizes over the course of your career. Do you want to work on a smaller game next, or have you got a real taste for blockbusters now?
Blockbusters are really hard. I do have a desire to create something of a small scale, but I guess I'm starting to feel that may not be feasible, or allowed. I feel jealousy when I see smaller, independent games.

What did you learned throughout the process?
I learned a lot about how to develop and market a blockbuster. In the end, all of that experience means that I'm probably going to work on a similar game next, to be honest. This time around the main focus was to create a *Final Fantasy* that could draw in new fans. To ensure that we can keep making these games, we need to be interesting newcomers. That was a focus for this round. But moving forward I want to look into new IPs and perhaps establish one.

Whose opinion of *Final Fantasy XV* are you most anticipating hearing?
The players', of course. Their opinions have to come first. I'm aware that some of those opinions won't be favourable. But if people form those opinions earnestly from having played the game, then I certainly want to consider those points of view, one by one. Of course, I also want to hear what Hironobu Sakaguchi has to say. It's always interesting to hear feedback from the people who worked on the very first *Final Fantasy* titles. I always ask for their opinions and listen to what they have to say.

After [2015's] Tokyo Game Show the opportunity arose for me to meet Sakaguchi-san. We spoke at length and he had some critical points to bring up, which he shared. He always has a lot more to say when he's drunk. I have to take him out properly if I really want to get some information out of him.



Characters can equip stat-buffing accessories, of which there are scores, as well as new costumes, of which there are desperately few in the base game. Further options might be added later via DLC

A Thousand Words

Prompto is a budding photographer who will incessantly take snapshots of the group's exploits, as well as routinely asking you to stop the car so he can take pictures next to important landmarks. His ability as a photographer levels up each time you rest, and via side missions Prompto can even start a career as a freelance photojournalist. These snapshots seem gimmicky at first, but the accumulating record of your journey is, in the long run, welcome, despite the occasional irritation of having to make a whimsical detour.

☞ However, the script doesn't invest players enough in the right places to pull off the emotional coups it's aiming at. As such, the numerous moments at which we're asked to grieve or rejoice with characters ring a little hollow. The most affecting moments occur between Noctis and his three companions — a touching moment of vulnerability as two of them chat on a roof at night, for example, or a hot-headed exchange after a battle (which, if Noctis becomes sufficiently riled, can increase his effectiveness in subsequent encounters).

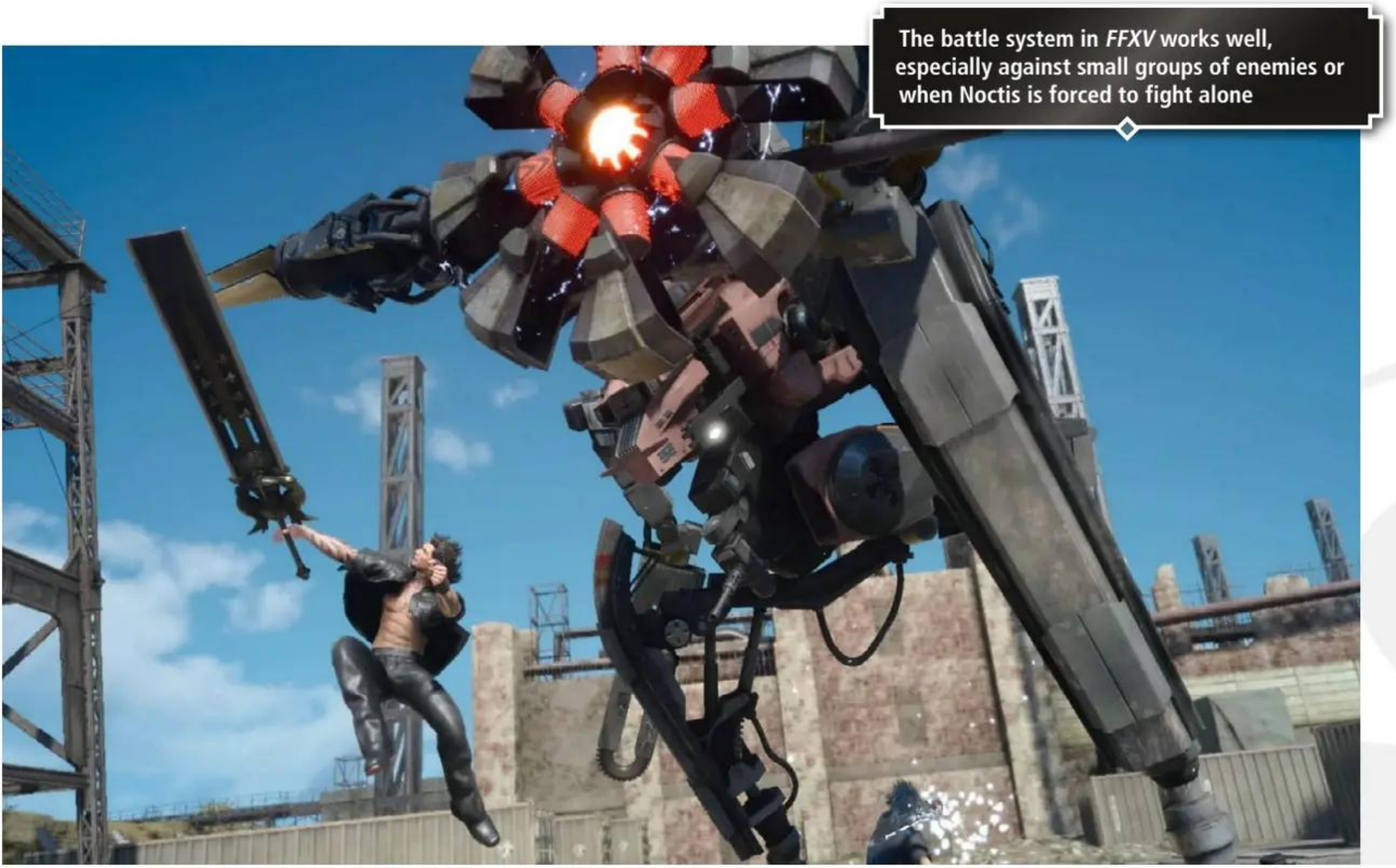
The creative pressures and arguments that have coloured *Final Fantasy XV*'s development are most evident in the second half, where it almost switches genre, away from the open world design of *The Witcher III*, which was an influence on the current team, to a much more traditional linear series of cutscenes and dungeons. Late in the game, a network of cramped corridors, stockrooms and baffling barracks feels like a hangover from another game entirely. Here, Noctis, working alone, must duck into doorways in order to hide from the stalking, haunted guards. The stealth is delivered in a horror style, complete with jump scares, a disembodied, Joker-like voiceover, and *Resident Evil*-style key-card puzzles.

To make clear the distinction between the two halves of the game, if you want to return to the open-world area you'll need to travel 'back in time' when at a save point. Once there, you can mop up any unresolved side-missions, until you're ready to return to the present. As further evidence of the underlying structural issues, the game is filled with nascent design ideas that never feel like finished, meaningful components. Cid, an ageing car mechanic who looks after the Regalia in the first half of the game with his daughter, Cindy, can modify certain weapons for you with the right parts. The option to do so disappears almost as soon as it arrives.

Once you have access to Chocobos you can hire a bird for up to seven days at a time. Summoning one is as simple as blowing on the Chocobo whistle. Chocobos move quickly, offroad, although you'll still find you want to rely on the Regalia for crossing larger distances. Your bird accrues experience points whenever you're riding and will level up automatically, increasing its stamina and, as time goes on, infusing it with the ability and will to join battles. Eventually you'll be able to name your steed, dye its feathers (using seeds and fruit) and even pin it with the medals you've won on the racetrack. And yet it never comes together into a rounded component. As soon as you've taken part in a couple of races, you're whisked off to another city and the Chocobos are gone.

You can equip different outfits to your characters, which replace armour, and provide different buffs and debuffs. There are almost no new outfits available in shops, however, and those you do find offer less protection than the standard-issue all-black regal getup. More problematic than the somewhat tokenistic inclusion of these stalwart *Final Fantasy* elements is the dearth of female characters in the party. There is undoubtedly a well-rounded exploration of male camaraderie and, at times, even affection via the four-man protagonist setup. But this is a series that has historically appealed to a broad range of players by allowing them to tailor their party according to taste or whim. The failure to provide a diverse playable cast feels like a damaging oversight.

In many of its fragments of ideas and mechanics, *Final Fantasy XV* shines. If the first half of the game represents the most recent work, then it reveals a capable team contending with an almost impossible mission. But by its stentorian conclusion, it's difficult to shake a feeling of confusion. *Final Fantasy XV* is a game full of hope, ambition and no shortage of things to see and do, but like a folly extended by successive generations of architects, it is a peculiar artefect that cannot obscure its past. Even before its release, it was among the most talked-about *Final Fantasy* games in the series' long history, and almost ten years since it hit shelves it remains a modern fan favourite.



The battle system in *FFXV* works well, especially against small groups of enemies or when Noctis is forced to fight alone

CHAPTER VII

A New Age

By 2017, *Final Fantasy*'s thirty-year arc had landed on a note of cautious resurrection. The great disasters of the early 2010s — the money-pit movie, the long implosion of *Versus XIII*, the calamitous launch of *Final Fantasy XIV*'s first version — had given way to unlikely triumphs. *FFXIV* had been reborn under Naoki Yoshida, *A Realm Reborn* serving as both a mea culpa and a statement of fresh intent, the foundation for a decade of lauded expansions. *Final Fantasy XV*, dragged blinking from a decade of troubled production, had won a passionate following for its intimate portrait of four young men on a long road trip. Players had warmed to the spiky-haired boyband whose petty squabbles and rivalries were offset by the camaraderie that comes from living in close quarters and facing a common enemy. Even Hironobu Sakaguchi, the series' estranged father, who once complained that his creation followed him around like a burden, seemed to have made his peace. A generation who grew up playing his games now carried the torch.

For a moment, the future of *Final Fantasy* looked secure. The series was no longer guided by a single visionary but by a loose constellation of creative stewards, each pulling the myth in a different direction. Not everyone appreciated the mixture. Some players had found *FFXV*'s tone discordant: the modern cars, campsites and instant-noodle realism clashing with the operatic solemnity of the plot. And a scattershot array of mobile spin-offs, intended to broaden the game's universe, only served to confuse it. In 2018, the game's director, Hajime Tabata, quit Square Enix, later citing "philosophical differences" with Yosuke Matsuda, the company's president. His departure left the series adrift, at least in the public imagination.

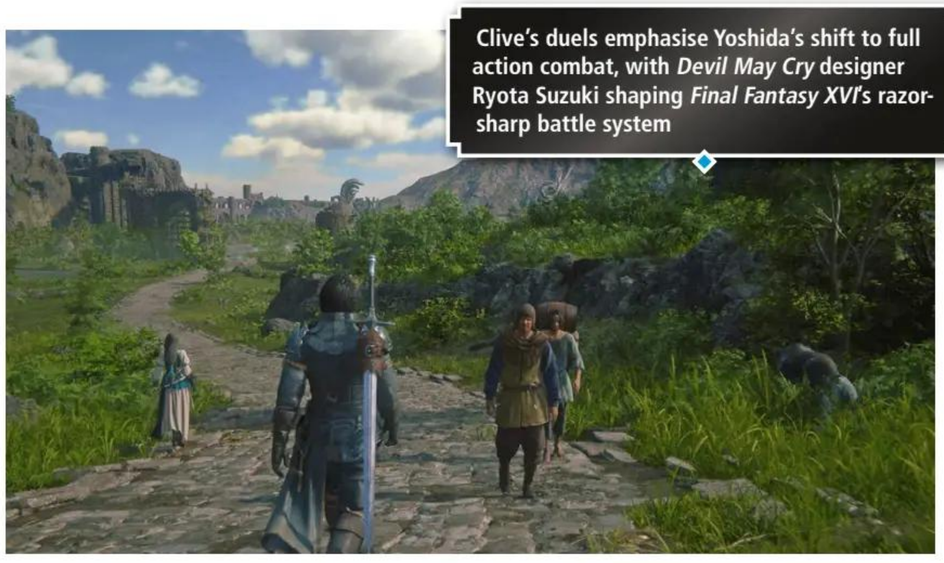
Valisthea's landscapes were designed to feel lived-in, echoing Yoshida's wish to return the series to grounded medieval realism and political texture

Return to Bedrock

Behind closed doors, however, another story had already begun. Naoki Yoshida, still deep in the long stewardship of *Final Fantasy XIV*, had been handed directorial responsibility for the next numbered entry. Work on *Final Fantasy XVI* pre-dated Tabata's exit, of course, but the expectations surrounding the project changed sharply afterward. The series needed not only reinvention but reassurance, and Yoshida understood that its future would be judged against the memory of its missteps as much as its triumphs.

After a decade in which *Final Fantasy* had ricocheted between tones and settings, audiences seemed unsure what the series now stood for. Yoshida believed it needed to touch bedrock. His answer was a return to its formative vocabulary: knights, kingdoms, crystals, and the fragile geopolitics of warring nations. If *FFXV* had been a story of intimacy, *FFXVI* would be a story of forces: sovereignty, scarcity, empire. The team looked outward as well. Their tonal reference was *Game of Thrones*, the HBO television series based on the fantasy series of books, works of dynastic politics, courtroom betrayals, battlefield reckonings. The aim was to blend the 'old soul' of *Final Fantasy* with a forward-facing mission, and blockbuster references from culture.

> "If Final Fantasy XV had been a story of intimacy, Final Fantasy XVI would be a story of forces: sovereignty, scarcity, empire"

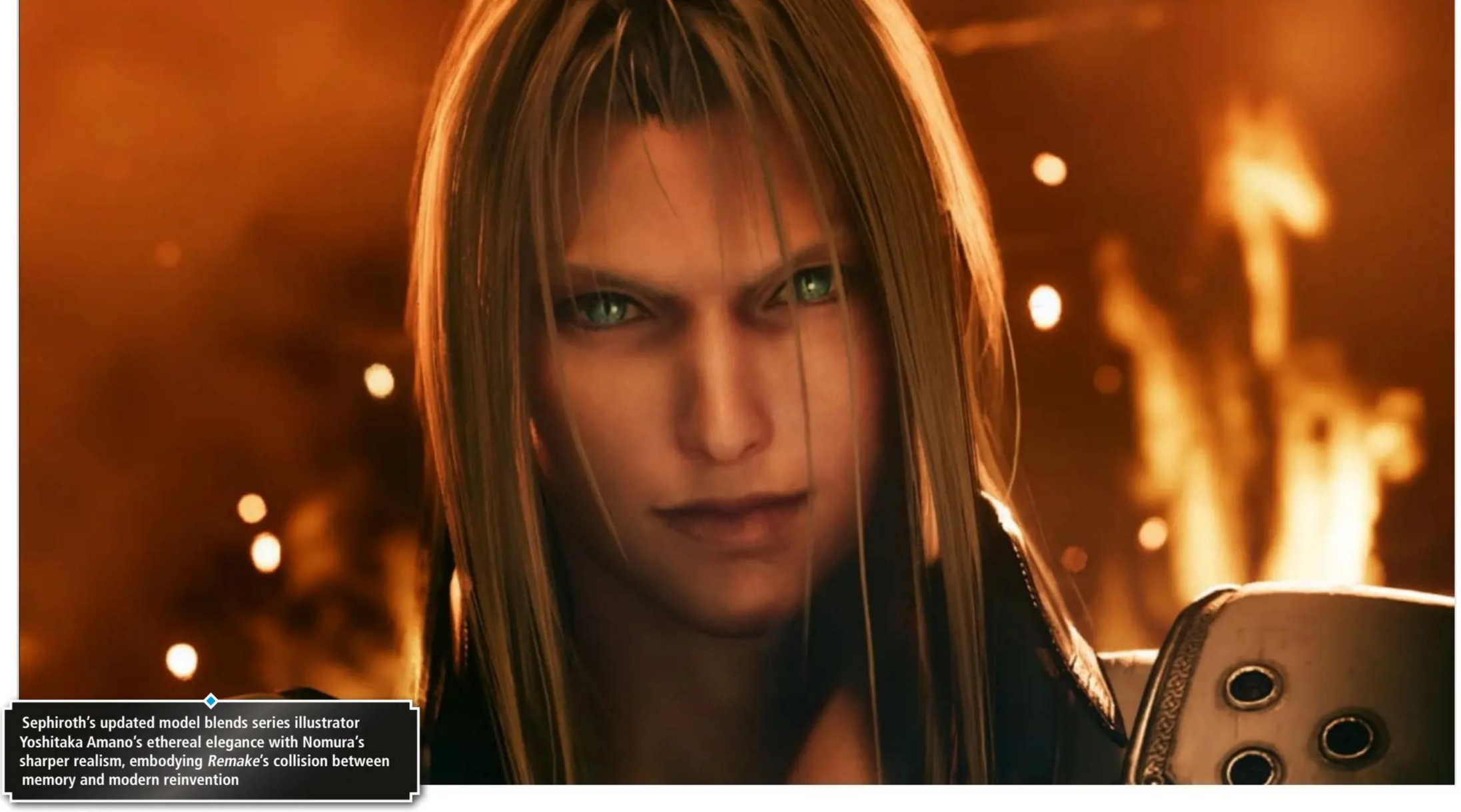


Clive's duels emphasise Yoshida's shift to full action combat, with *Devil May Cry* designer Ryota Suzuki shaping *Final Fantasy XVI*'s razor-sharp battle system

You play as Clive Rosfield, heir to a minor duchy in the fractured realm of Valisthea, a continent divided between rival powers, each sustained by a Mothercrystal and a Dominant who channels its destructive magic. The game embraced real-time action combat completely: Clive darts, parries, and unleashes Eikon abilities in battles staged as operatic clashes between gods. It's kinetic in a way no *Final Fantasy* had been before.

As in *Final Fantasy VII*, beneath the spectacle lies a world arranged around hierarchy and exploitation. Magic in Valisthea is worked not by the ruling classes but by Bearers — people marked from birth, pressed into lives of forced labour, battlefield conscription, or casual disposability. The cruelty is systemic: Bearers are owned, traded, mutilated, or "expended" when no longer useful. Courts and councils speak of these populations not as citizens but as resources: variables in a calculus of national survival.

Rosfield moves through his world less as a chosen one than a political agent buffeted by forces larger than himself. Yoshida's team embraced the grammar of prestige television: the long, breathless crescendo of a battle scored like a season finale; performances calibrated for interiority as much as spectacle. It is a game unwavering in its seriousness, one that trusts its audience to follow it into grief, atrocity, and ☞



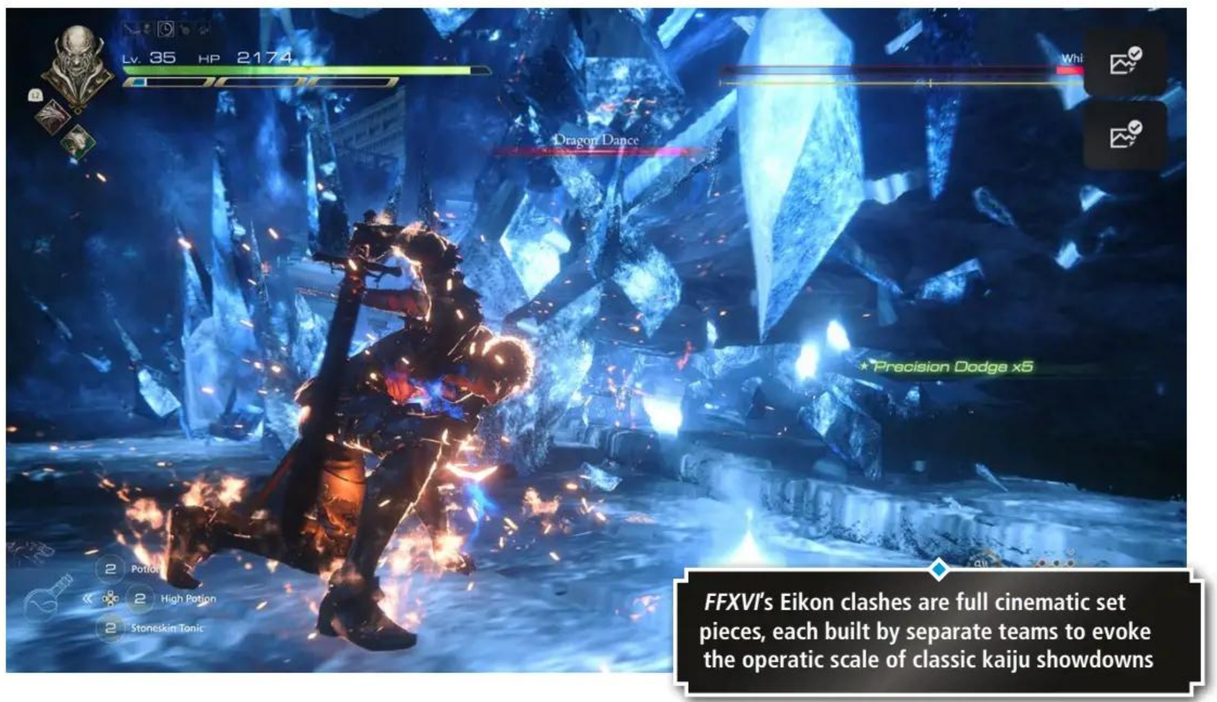
Sephiroth's updated model blends series illustrator Yoshitaka Amano's ethereal elegance with Nomura's sharper realism, embodying *Remake*'s collision between memory and modern reinvention

the compromises of power, as well as, naturally, the simple joy of riding a giant chicken.

The experiment largely succeeded. Critics praised the game's focus, its thematic boldness, and its willingness to pare away inherited clutter. Commercially, it sold strongly, though perhaps not at the runaway pace Square Enix had projected, but once again its tonal severity divided players. Some celebrated its clarity of purpose; others missed the eccentricities. But even its detractors conceded that *FFXVI* had given *Final Fantasy* something it had lacked for years: a direction that felt deliberate, not improvised.

Remembering the Future

Running parallel to Yoshida's forward thrust was a project driven by the opposite impulse: the effort to reinterpret the past. The *Final Fantasy VII Remake* trilogy — part blockbuster, part technological showcase — is a confrontation between eras. If *FFXVI* asks what the series must become, *Remake* asks what it must remember. The original *FFVII* had dragged the franchise (and, arguably, videogames themselves) into cinematic modernity, replacing hand-drawn sprites with pre-rendered metropolises and broad archetypes with characters who could be funny, melancholy, conflicted, or determined. Its story of Cloud, Aerith, and the Shinra Corporation marked a decisive break with the series' 16-bit lineage, and its creation was famously turbulent: should its world be rendered with deformed characters or realistic ones, manga stylisation or something approaching live action?



FFXVI's Eikon clashes are full cinematic set pieces, each built by separate teams to evoke the operatic scale of classic kaiju showdowns

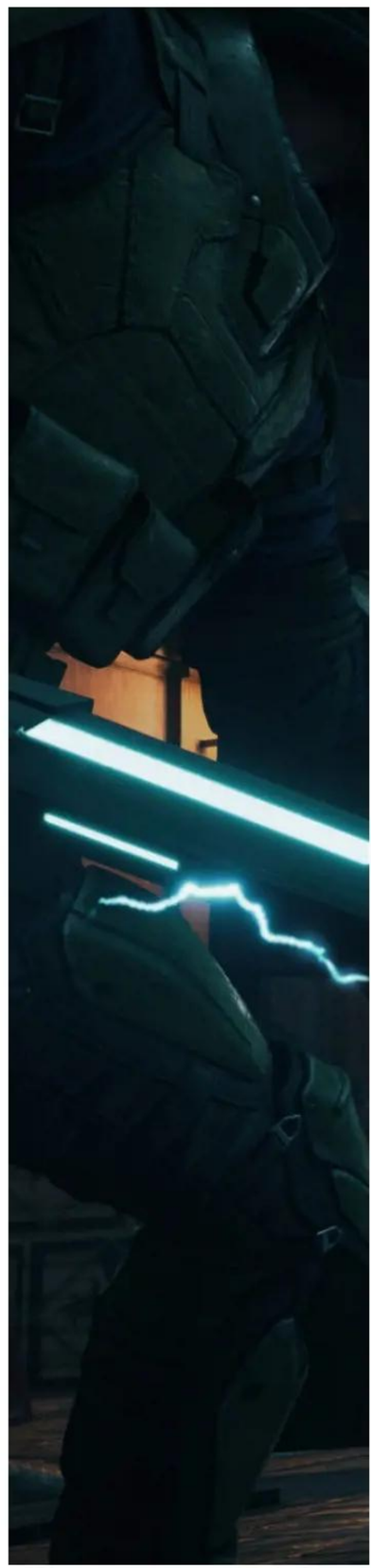
The *Remake* trilogy inherited not just *FFVII*'s plot but the emotional and artistic contradictions that forged it. In 2020 its first chapter opened not with the past faithfully reconstructed but with the past unsettled. Characters sense their story is being retold and resist its rails. The game becomes a dialogue not only between Cloud and Sephiroth but between Kitase's generation and the generation that came after, between the imagination of the late '90s and the technological decadence of the early 2020s.

Where *FFXVI* narrowed its focus, *Remake* widens it to baroque scale. Every alleyway in Midgar is more elaborate than an entire village once was. Every boss battle is staged as a three-act opera, crescendos of particle effects and orchestral emphasis. And moments that, by necessity, had been brisk moments in the original game, were carefully expanded to fit the technology and expectations of modern players. If *FFXVI* is Yoshida's argument that *Final Fantasy* must become leaner, the *Remake* trilogy is Nomura and Kitase's assertion that scale and ambition is itself the series' legacy: emotional heft, stylistic maximalism, those attributes that helped make *FFVII* a phenomenon in the first place.

What makes the *Remake* project compelling, even in its excesses, is its honesty about nostalgia's impossible perfectionism. It acknowledges that to recreate *FFVII* is not to restore it but to collide with it. What emerged is not simple homage but a work about memory's fissures, about the difference between what we loved, and what we can reconstruct.

An Unfinished World

The question that now hangs over the series is whether these disparate impulses — the MMO's stability, the *Remake*'s maximalism, Yoshida's austerity — can coexist without dissolving the idea of *Final Fantasy* entirely. The early games had reshaped themselves out of necessity: memory constraints, new hardware, shifting teams. Over time, adaptation became tradition — a series defined less by iteration than by its ability to



change form. In the past, that creative evolution came from a small circle of visionaries. Today, it emerges from many.

The series has become, strangely, more itself by becoming less unified. Each new entry grows as a branch from the same long-lived trunk: over here, Yoshida's turn toward politically grounded fantasy; over there, Kitase and Nomura's exploration of memory, metafiction and scale. Near the centre sits the MMO team's commitment to long-form storytelling and world stewardship. Around them sprout new shoots — Pixel Remasters, HD-2D throwbacks, mobile experiments — works that preserve the early games' compact design. *Final Fantasy* no longer proceeds in a single direction but radiates outward, like light refracting through a crystal.

Its influence now spills past videogames, too. The recent collaboration with Magic: The Gathering — cards that transpose Shiva, Gilgamesh, Cloud, and even the series' battle rhythms into Magic's grammar — became a minor phenomenon, with pre-orders spiking across continents. It marked a clear demonstration of how far *Final Fantasy* has travelled since its origins as a niche curiosity from a Tokyo start-up. A game became a series became a franchise, one that has now grown into a kind of modern folklore machine: a universe portable enough to slip between mediums without losing its charge.

In the early days of *Final Fantasy*, Sakaguchi would gather his exhausted team to watch the ending they had spent years building, champagne in hand; the next morning, hungover, they would return to their desks to find a blank sheet of paper titled, simply: 'Where now?' The question remains, but its meaning has changed. Once a directive to a small circle of creators, it is now an invitation to an entire lineage.

The people making *Final Fantasy* today are the children who once explored its pixelated worlds, carrying not only the series' legacy but their own memories. The franchise has become a living memory system, a set of worlds continually rebuilt by those who once walked through them. Whatever new world is being shaped behind closed doors in Tokyo, the series will endure because it thrives not on certainty but on renewal, the perpetual game of creation and re-creation that has defined *Final Fantasy* from the beginning and will, so long as players chase its light, carry it into the next familiar unknown.

Cloud, Ex-SOLDIER
Legendary Creature — Human Soldier Mercenary
Haste
When Cloud enters, attach up to one target Equipment you control to it.

Wizards' *Final Fantasy* set transforms icons like Cloud and Y'shtola into Legendary Creatures, while its 77 rare Chocobo cards (the Magic equivalent of Willy Wonka tickets) now trade for tens of thousands of dollars

Final Fantasy VII Remake reimagines Midgar as a dense, breathing city, expanding moments once compressed by 1997 hardware into full dramatic set pieces

Story continues on Pg104

The Making Of

FINAL FA

FINAL FANTASY XVI

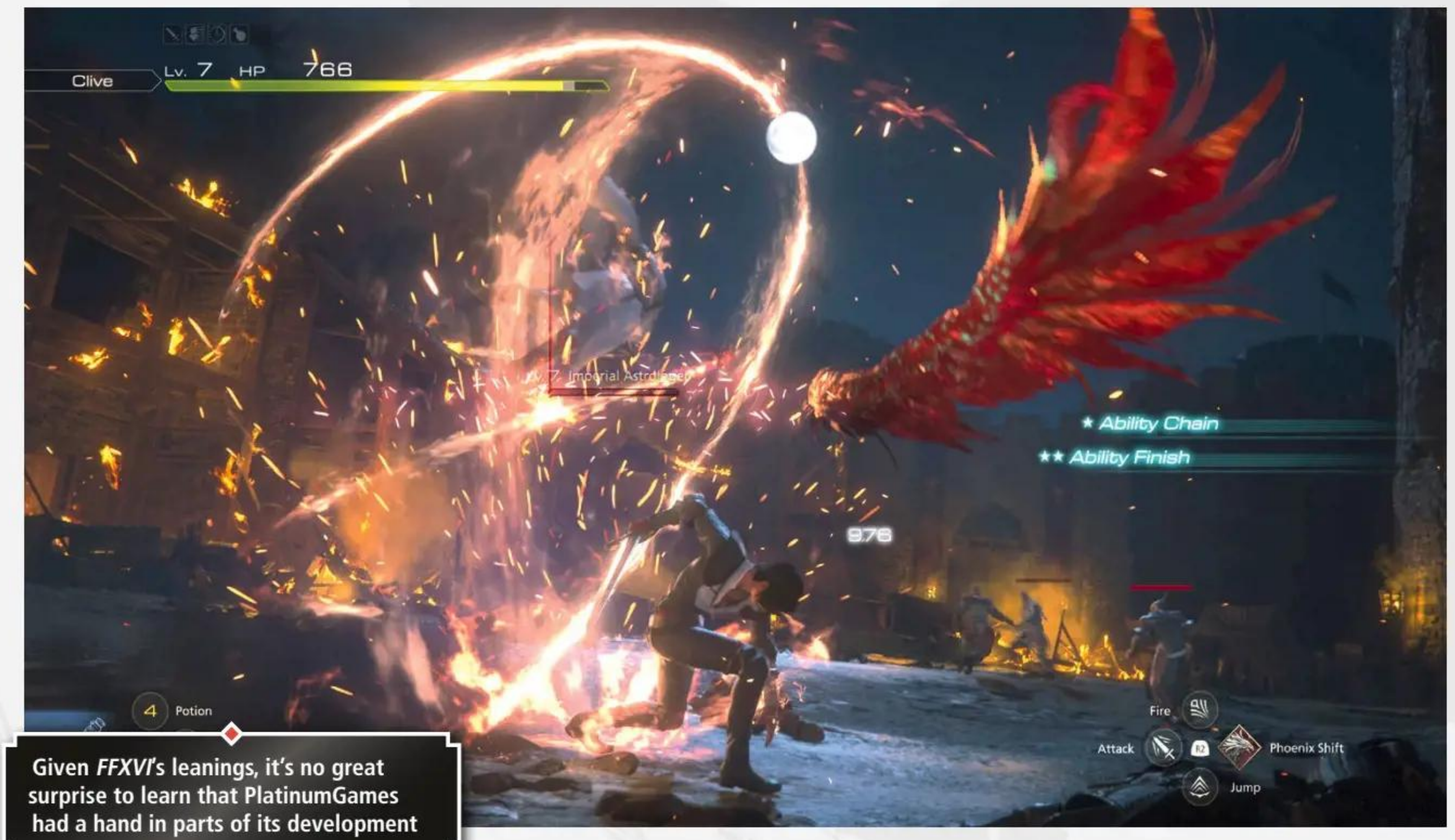
How action led the way in reinventing the long-running RPG series

The words 'Final Fantasy' might have become something of a misnomer over the decades, this venerable series having spanned almost 40 years and 16 releases (not counting the innumerable spinoffs, remakes, expansions, and sub-sequels such as *FFX-2*). Yet look closer at any given mainline instalment and there is a certain, well, finality to be found. After all, each *Final Fantasy* has a new world, story and systems — which means that, unless it's one of those that gets the spinoff treatment, it may very well also be the last outing for all those things too.

Perhaps no instalment in this series, though, has so clearly put the past behind it as *Final Fantasy XVI*. That was apparent right from the game's initial reveal in 2020, which defiantly set out its stall as a radical departure. Here was a mature fantasy story unafraid to shed blood (or clothing), that ditched the traditional customisable party in favour of a single protagonist, Clive Rosfield, and, perhaps most striking of all, presented a heavy emphasis on real-time action combat, with nary a command menu in sight.

It's easy to see why Square Enix would choose to entrust Creative Business Unit III, of all its studios, with taking these risks. This, after all, was the team that managed to take *Final Fantasy XIV* from the series' biggest catastrophe to its most profitable release to date. It's a tempting narrative, but one that Naoki Yoshida — producer of both *FFXVI* and *XIV*'s *A Realm Reborn* comeback — pushes against. Yoshida credits a number of other factors, including the fact that Creative Business Unit I was already busy with *Final Fantasy VII Remake*; he does acknowledge, however, the part that *XIV*'s successful reinvention and the fervent support of its community played in landing this job.

And when they did, Yoshida and his team approached the project with a conscious desire to subvert preconceptions, not just of *Final Fantasy* but of Japanese RPGs as a whole, though without jettisoning everything that longtime devotees associate with the series. Of ☞



Given *FFXVI*'s leanings, it's no great surprise to learn that PlatinumGames had a hand in parts of its development

this there might be no better microcosm than *FFXVI*'s approach to the *Final Fantasy* bestiary. A number of popular creatures from the series were omitted, so as "not to undermine the setting and world created", according to creative director and scenario writer Kazutoyo Maehiro. It's certainly hard to imagine how the cactuar, looking as they traditionally have like a prickly, bright-green take on *Animal Crossing*'s gyroids, might fit into the realm of Valisthea, a grittier setting strongly influenced by medieval European history. Other series stalwarts, meanwhile, appear only in reinterpreted form, the most radical example of which might be Tiamat, Wyvern, Biast and Aevis – here the names are given to characters rather than draconic monsters.

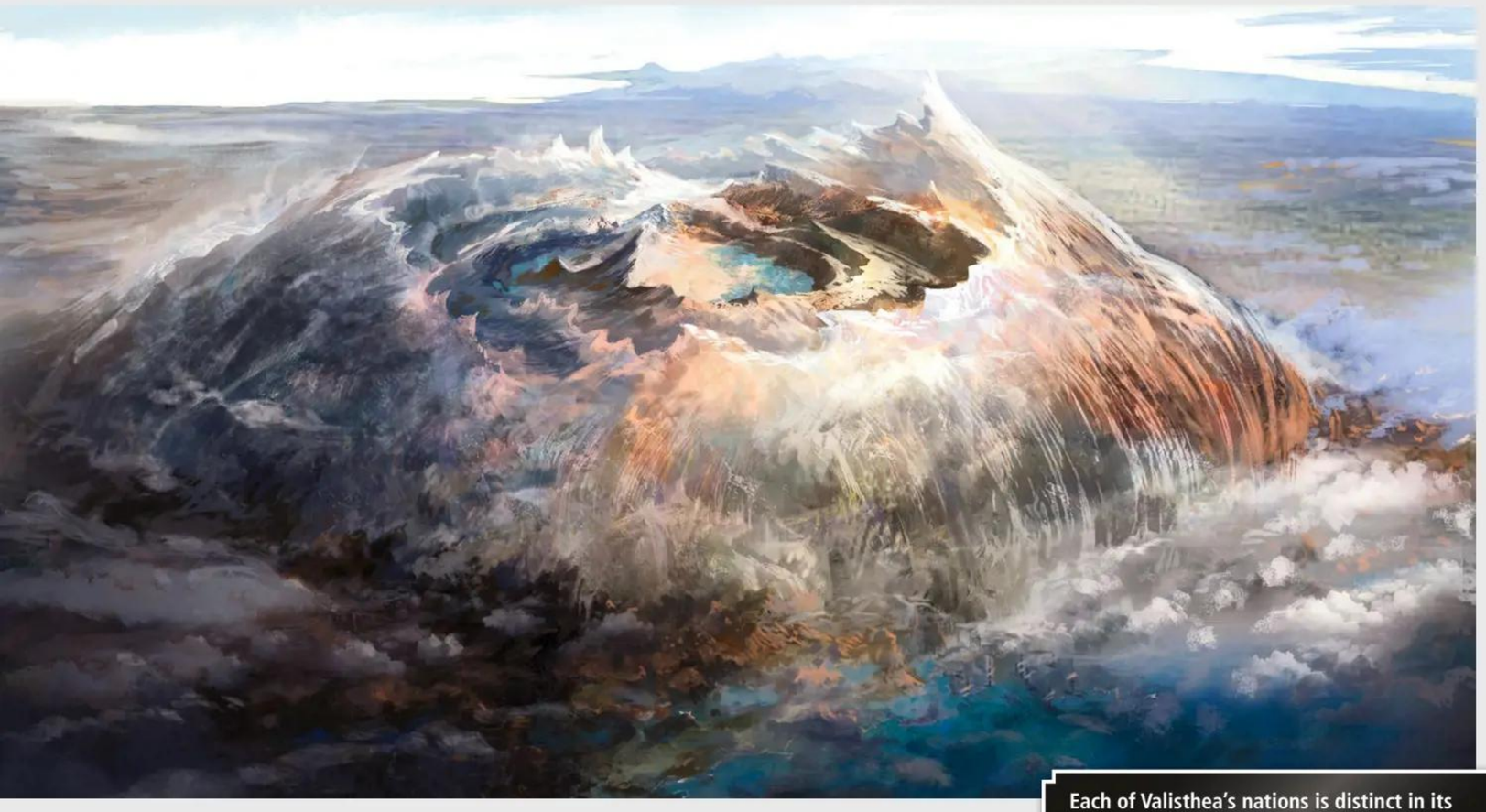
On the other hand, Maehiro counters, many recurring creatures have been carefully recreated as they have previously appeared, "giving the same overall impression, just rendered with the latest technology". The design of *FFXVI*'s goblins, for instance, are based directly on the original sprites. Meanwhile, the game does make room for at least one fantastical (and adorable) inclusion seemingly at odds with the more grounded setting: the moogle. The inclusion of this flying furball, Maehiro explains, was at Yoshida's insistence: "The producer felt passionately that they were the face of the *Final Fantasy* series and told us to include them in there."

Having moved away from so much of the series' traditional iconography, Creative Business Unit III looked elsewhere for inspiration – notably, to Western pop culture. Main director Hiroshi Takai admits he bought the entire *Game Of Thrones* television series on Blu-ray, and he also went out of his way to import the North American version of *God Of War*. "I've been greatly inspired by both works in different ways," he says. "The former, as a dark fantasy piece of film; the latter, a real-time game that presents cathartic set-pieces and performances."

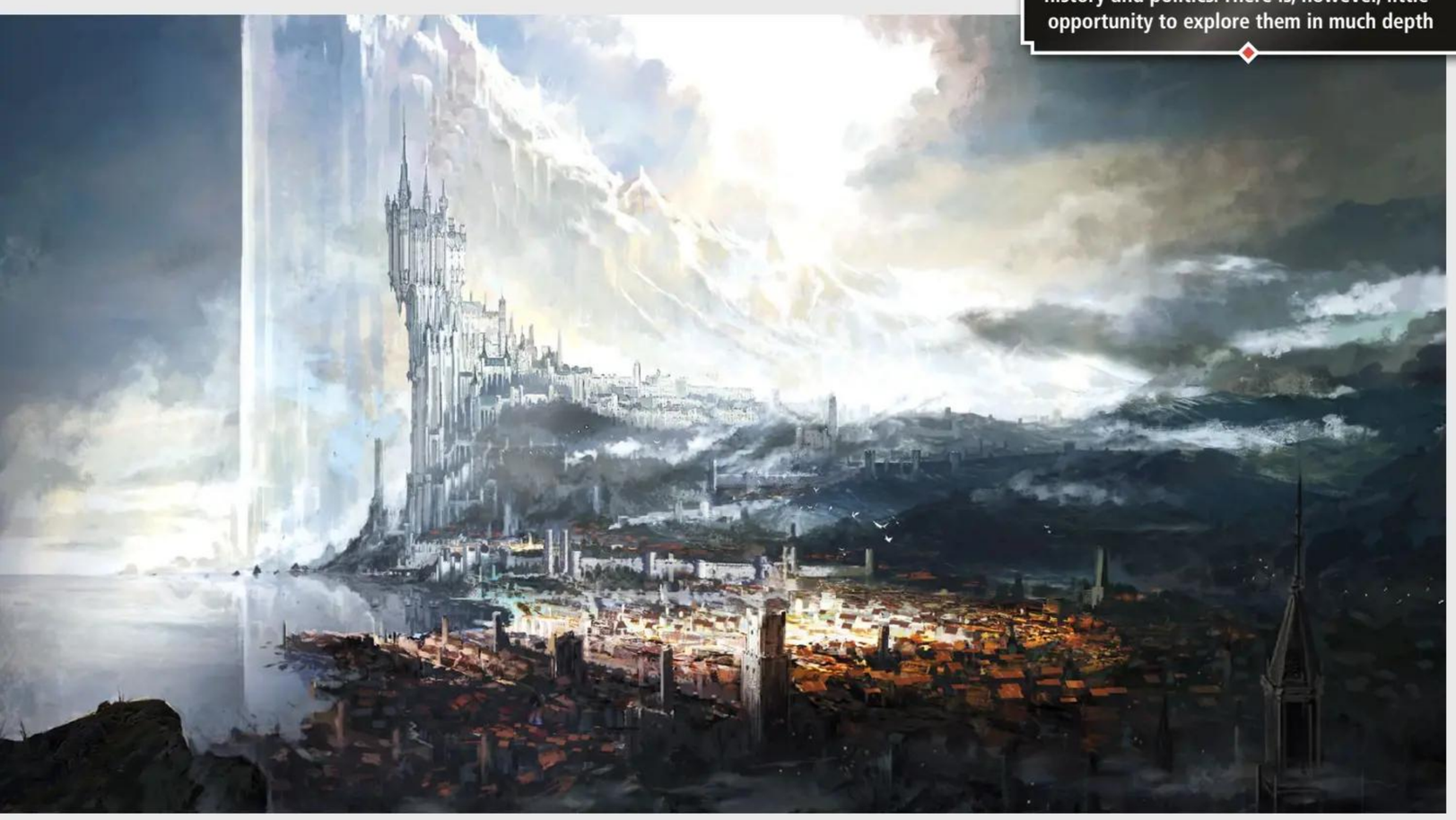
Yoshida similarly references the HBO show, highlighting Jon Snow as a particular inspiration for protagonist Clive. The firstborn son of House Rosfield may not be a bastard but he is a Bastard – that is, one of a unit of enslaved soldiers (and owners of the aforementioned dragon-based codenames). And, after breaking free, he joins a group dedicated to the liberation of other magic Bearers, placing him among outcasts akin to the Night's Watch of Westeros.

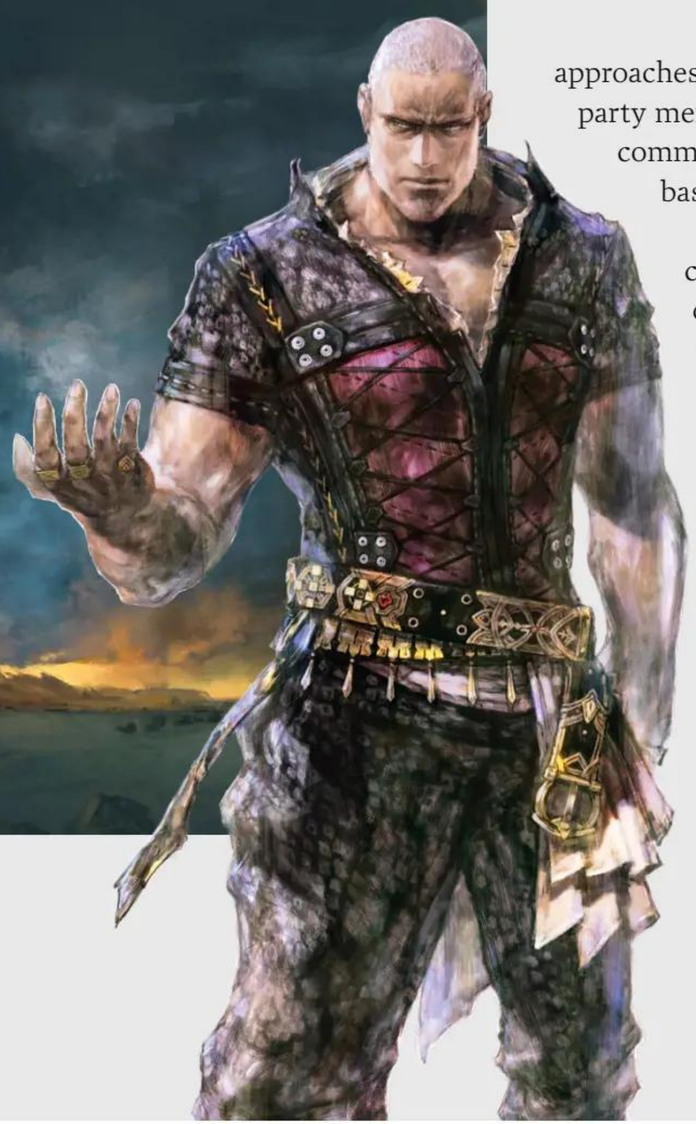
He's lived a life, then, our Clive – and Yoshida tells us it was a conscious choice to put players in the shoes of an older character, another break from series tradition. "When you're telling a gothic fantasy story with weight to the narrative, then you need to think about the backstory of the main character and what burdens they bear," he says. "I felt that a protagonist in their teens wouldn't really work when trying to do justice to that kind of story." While we do meet our hero at the age of 15, it's just for the duration of the game's prologue, before the story follows him into his 20s, and eventually his 30s. Hence the controversial absence of a traditional party, with companions instead coming and going as dictated by the movements of Clive's life story.

There were, however, other advantages to limiting the game to a single playable character, particularly in the move to real-time combat. "As we created *FFXVI*, we felt that going with a turn-based or menu-based battle system might limit who might pick up and play the game – much as we understand how fun that kind of gameplay can be ourselves," Takai says of that decision. "We thought it would be easier for a broad range of people if the control scheme allowed players to directly feel the actions and reactions through their inputs via the controller." And while *FFVII Remake* and *FFXV* featured similarly action-focused



Each of Valisthea's nations is distinct in its history and politics. There is, however, little opportunity to explore them in much depth





Q&A

MASAYOSHI SOKEN

COMPOSER

What was the main difference between scoring *FFXVI* and your previous work on *FFXIV*?
For *FFXIV*, I often use arrangements of the theme song for the main story content and arrangements of past *Final Fantasy* songs for battle content. For *FFXVI*, most of the pieces are arrangements of the different themes for characters and nations. This difference is down to the fact that the environment surrounding the player is very different for [each game].

There are callbacks to the series' classic themes by Nobuo Uematsu. How do you decide how and when to incorporate them?
Honestly, the only way I can answer a question about how I decide on which callbacks to include is to say: gut feeling! I'm a gamer to my bones, and I've played the *Final Fantasy* series for a long time, so I suppose I relied on my 'gamer senses' to guide me.

Your Titan boss fight theme ditches the orchestral score in favour of something more electronic. What motivated that shift?
When I received the request for the [Titan] track, I was actually asked for an orchestral piece. I got partway through, but something just wasn't quite right. For that battle, the visuals and the combat are already pretty out there, so rather than have some dainty instruments with their delicate sound, I felt like it would be better to go all out and have something that just screamed 'power'. I didn't come to the conclusion with logic – it was just a gut feeling from my past experience working on sound for videogames. It wasn't what I'd been asked for, but everyone agreed that what I came up with was better.

approaches, they had to accommodate other party members, a juggling act that required command menus or the latter's pause-based Wait Mode.

With its singular focus, *FFXVI*'s combat has more of the feel of a character action game – something that can be attributed at least in part to the team's newest hire, combat director Ryota Suzuki. The Capcom veteran's credits include *Devil May Cry 5* and *Monster Hunter: World* – and it's not hard to draw a comparison between Clive's lightning-fast moveset and Dante's, or indeed the colossal Eikon battles and a showdown with an elder dragon.

Not that it was as simple as simply lifting design principles from those games, of course. *DMC5*'s

The Eikons are likened to be revered and feared in Valisthea in the same way as weapons of mass destruction would be

☞ hack-and-slash action, for instance, relies on complex inputs and mechanics that make it as highly technical as a fighting game. "I knew that the basic controls and combat system had to be something that was easy to understand and easy to play for people who weren't used to action games," Suzuki says. "With that premise firmly in place, I went through and selected what elements to use or reject for the combat design. For players of *Final Fantasy*, just the fact that the combat is now all-out action gameplay is a major shift."

Some moves require a little more technical skill, such as the precise timing to parry an attack with Titan's Block, or the evasion and counterattack of Rook's Gambit. But even the most powerful Eikonic abilities have relatively simple inputs, requiring only a press of R2 along with the corresponding face button. These are something of a consolation for *FFXVI*'s single playable character: able to equip and seamlessly switch between the abilities of three Eikons, Clive is effectively a one-man party.

Each Eikon enables a unique set of moves, pushing Clive towards a distinct playstyle. "Since the Eikonic abilities have such a variety of characteristics, different players will find different abilities appealing once they start learning and playing around with them," Suzuki says. These playstyles can be customised via skill trees — which, in order to encourage experimentation, can be respecced at any time. "I removed any penalty for resetting ability points because I wanted everyone to be able to create a build that suits their own preferences through this kind of trial and error." It's a refreshing flexibility compared to, say, *FFX*'s Sphere Grids or *FFXII*'s License Boards. And while you can theoretically immediately max out later Eikons by resetting abilities from another one you aren't getting much use out of, equally you're able to change your mind at any point and pour those points back into an old favourite.

For Suzuki, it was essential that players wouldn't simply discard each Eikon in favour of more powerful options as the game progressed. "I really focused on differentiating the Eikons through Clive's fighting style, rather than making the individual Eikons stronger or weaker than one another as a whole," he says of his decision to give each of these powerful beings its own strengths and weaknesses. For instance, wind elemental Garuda has agile skills that help to break the enemy's stance, at the expense of pure attack power; if pure damage output is your priority, the hulking Titan has that in spades, though lacks mobility. "This means that the ability to switch between Eikons becomes crucial," Suzuki adds, "and I constructed the system to clearly bring out the differences between the options each Eikon presents."

"CBUIII looked elsewhere for inspiration – notably, to Western pop culture"

Another example of the dev team putting flexibility at the forefront lies in the way difficulty is handled in *FFXVI*. It's easy to understand the rationale: given the shift in genre, CBUIII was careful not to alienate a core audience which might not be totally confident with action games. Rather than having these players just "deal with it", in Takai's words, the combat was designed with "robust support systems" that could be tailored to each player's skill and preferences.

Initially, this led the team down the usual routes via difficulty settings and accessibility options, before they landed on a more novel, diegetic approach. Players can equip a limited number of ring accessories that assist with combat — slowing down incoming attacks to widen the dodge window, for example, or making it possible to string together complex combos automatically, using a single button. It's a tradeoff, since these rings take up slots that could otherwise be used to equip other stat-enhancing accessories acquired in the game.

When we ask why this approach was taken, Suzuki presents an interesting theory. "Players have

Eikon-versus-Eikon battles are the climactic highlight of *FFXVI*'s chapters, allowing CBUIII to create some show-stopping set pieces

their own pride as gamers, and feel a strong resistance towards setting a game to 'easy' and using the support features on their first playthrough," he says. "To soften any such resistance, I decided to link the action support features to accessories." It's worth noting, though, that players are still asked at the game's outset to choose between 'Story-Focused' and 'Action-Focused' modes, the former automatically equipping several of the rings by default.

It's an example, perhaps, of the compromises CBUIII had to make in pursuit of an action-oriented game that could cater to a broad range of players. The intricacies of its combat, for example, are somewhat lost when taking on low-level field grunts, while boss fights have generous checkpoints. To really appreciate the mechanical depth of the combat, you'll have to go looking: its *Devil May Cry*-style scoring system is hidden unless you opt to replay levels via Arcade Mode.

Meanwhile, Final Fantasy Mode, which Takai calls "the level of difficulty that we originally had in mind for [*FFXVI*'s] combat", is only available after the game has been beaten. "We felt strongly that we wanted people to first focus on experiencing Clive's story through to its finale," Takai says. Once again, the team didn't want to make players "responsible" for the level of challenge, and thus potentially self-conscious about their abilities. "For New Game+ onwards, I think it's fine for the player to select a more difficult setting at their own discretion, which is why we made it so that Final Fantasy Mode would be unlocked at that point."

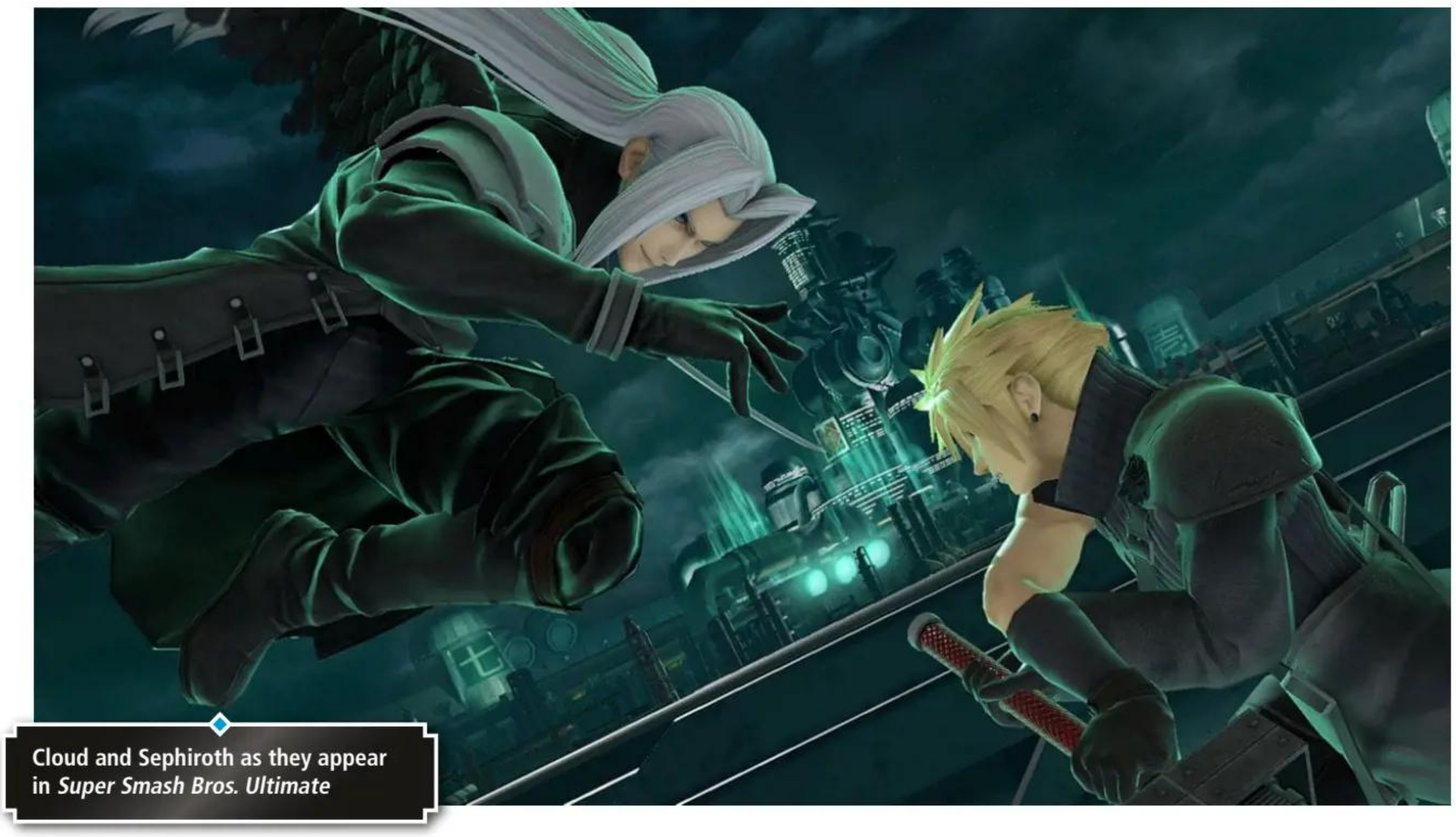
Whether this is a gambit that has paid off is open to debate. Despite strong sales at launch according to Square Enix, an earnings call a month later noted that it had not met the company's upper expectations, in part due to PS5's still-limited installed base. The PC port and two post-release expansions may yet turn things around in the long term – Yoshida and CBUIII certainly have form in that regard. But perhaps the best way to judge *Final Fantasy XVI*'s experiments and innovations will be by their finality – whether they are adopted as a template for the series' future, or share the same fate as *FFXII*'s own Gambit system (though you might argue that the latter's lone appearance has only made it shine brighter in retrospect).

Of course, that decision ultimately lies in the hands of the next team of developers tasked with creating a new world, story and system, the cycle of *Final Fantasy* renewing as it always has. But do the members of Creative Business Unit III have any view on where the series might go next, we wonder? "Everyone has their own idea of what exactly defines that unique *Final Fantasy* DNA," Takai says. "Of course, those aspects that are commonly accepted as being essential to *Final Fantasy* are likely to be passed down, but for the team working on future instalments in the series, they will just make a game that they think will be fun."

The technology of The Fallen has more in common with science-fiction themes than typical fantasy fare

CHAPTER VIII

Limit Break



Cloud and Sephiroth as they appear in *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate*

If it's ironic that *Final Fantasy* turned out not to be SquareSoft's last shot at making an RPG, then it's fair to say that almost four decades later, there's vastly more to *Final Fantasy* than just RPGs. You could argue that's been a strength of the series from the very beginning, with Yoshitaka Amano's striking illustrations on the Famicom boxes elevating the early games beyond their rudimentary 8-bit sprites. With new advances in technology, each title's characters, worlds and motifs have captured the imaginations of fans to become something that transcends the limits of just a single medium or series.

It's perhaps why *Final Fantasy VII* remains the most beloved, as the game that first made that leap from cartridge to CD-ROM, where full-motion video and richer audio quality helped expand the possibilities of its world. The significance of that title is arguably why Square Enix has gone above and beyond with the *Final Fantasy VII Remake* trilogy, re-imagining this pivotal entry not just in the series but for videogames, with all the maximalist grandeur that contemporary cutting-edge technology can muster.

Across the Realms

You don't even strictly have to be a fan of RPGs to be a fan of *Final Fantasy*. Although the majority of its mainline output consists of traditional turn-based battles, spin-offs have found inventive and experimental (if not always successful) ways to explore its universes and characters through wildly different perspectives and genres. And some may have even indirectly influenced the direction of the mainline games themselves. We've also seen the series' most beloved characters cross over into other game universes altogether, from Square Enix's *Kingdom Hearts* series to Cloud and Sephiroth turning up as guest fighters in the *Super Smash Bros.* series. Perhaps more surprising was seeing *Final Fantasy XIII*'s Lightning collaborating with luxury fashion brand Louis Vuitton.

The vast lore in just a single game has been ripe for spin-offs or expansions, but there's also been more media to flesh out its world, not just in books, but films. Rather than novelisations or adaptations, the likes of *Advent Children* and *Kingsglaive* have respectively continued the story or filled fans in on another side of the saga altogether.

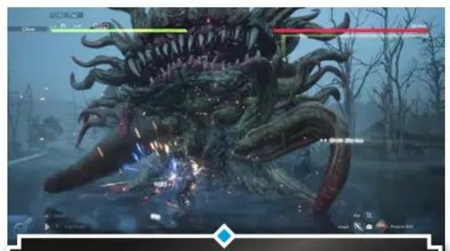
But sometimes, less is more. After all, given that most *Final Fantasy* games are typically one and done, it's incredible that their effect on us endures long after the adventure is over and the credits have rolled. For many fans, the most memorable characters live on through fan fiction, fan art or even imagined in reality through meticulously faithful cosplay creations.

Reliving Fantasy

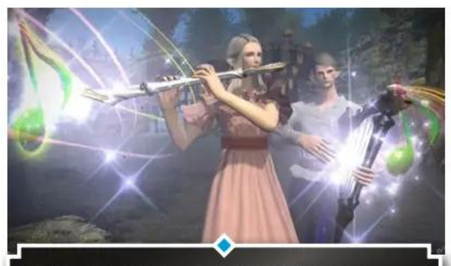
Of course, nothing is stopping you from simply starting the game all over again, whether that's to find and defeat all the toughest secret bosses you skipped out on the first time or simply reliving the most memorable battles and scenes, just like you would leaf through a good book.

For the time-poor, however, sometimes all it takes is putting on the soundtrack, where a single track or leitmotif can instantly transport you back to a moment. There's no denying that the music of *Final Fantasy* is just as important to each game as its characters, world and gameplay systems. It makes having the soundtrack almost as vital as the game itself, or better yet attending a concert where orchestras, bands, choirs and singers can bring all of the magic of its music to life.

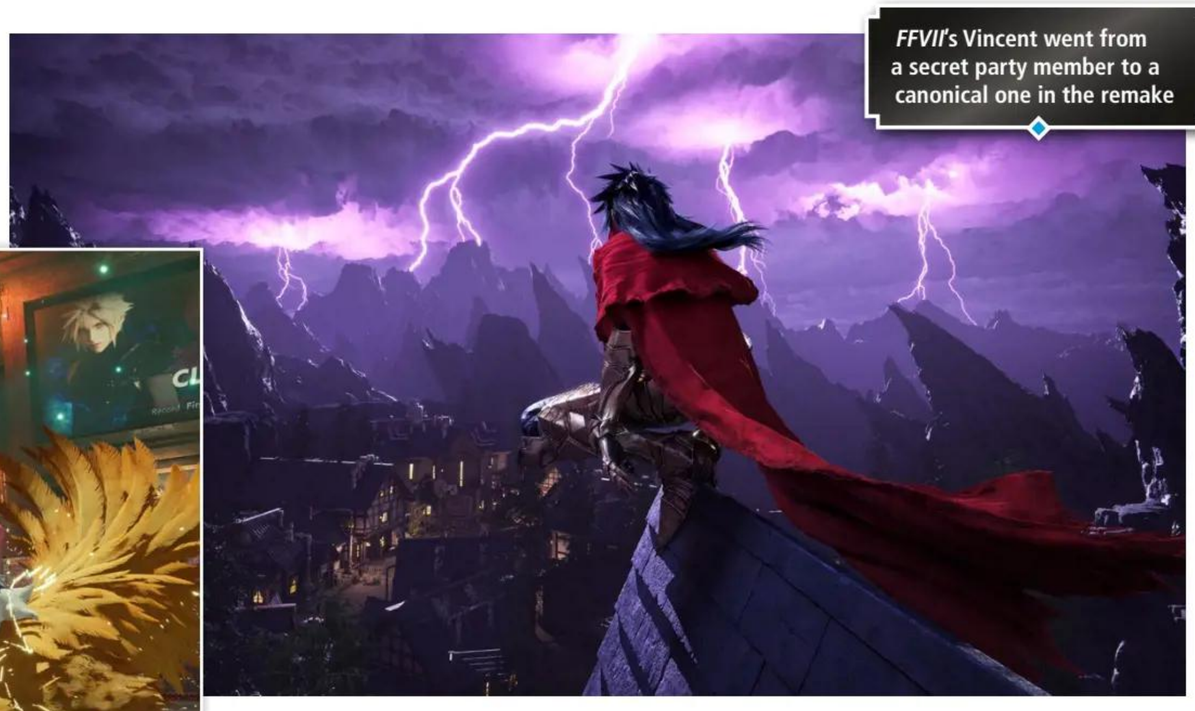
Even as we're coming towards the end of this book, the story of *Final Fantasy* isn't really over. Its spin-offs and remakes help reshape and redefine its identity, its characters and bosses embedded in our memories beyond the game itself, while its music and adaptations to even broader media transcend cultural boundaries. In other words, there is so much more to *Final Fantasy* than just a videogame franchise.



The series has many recurring monsters, which later entries come up with new ways of realising



You can appreciate *Final Fantasy* just for its music, and even learn an instrument in *FFXIV*



FFVII's Vincent went from a secret party member to a canonical one in the remake

No matter how the series evolves, you can always rely on the mascot creatures to be around

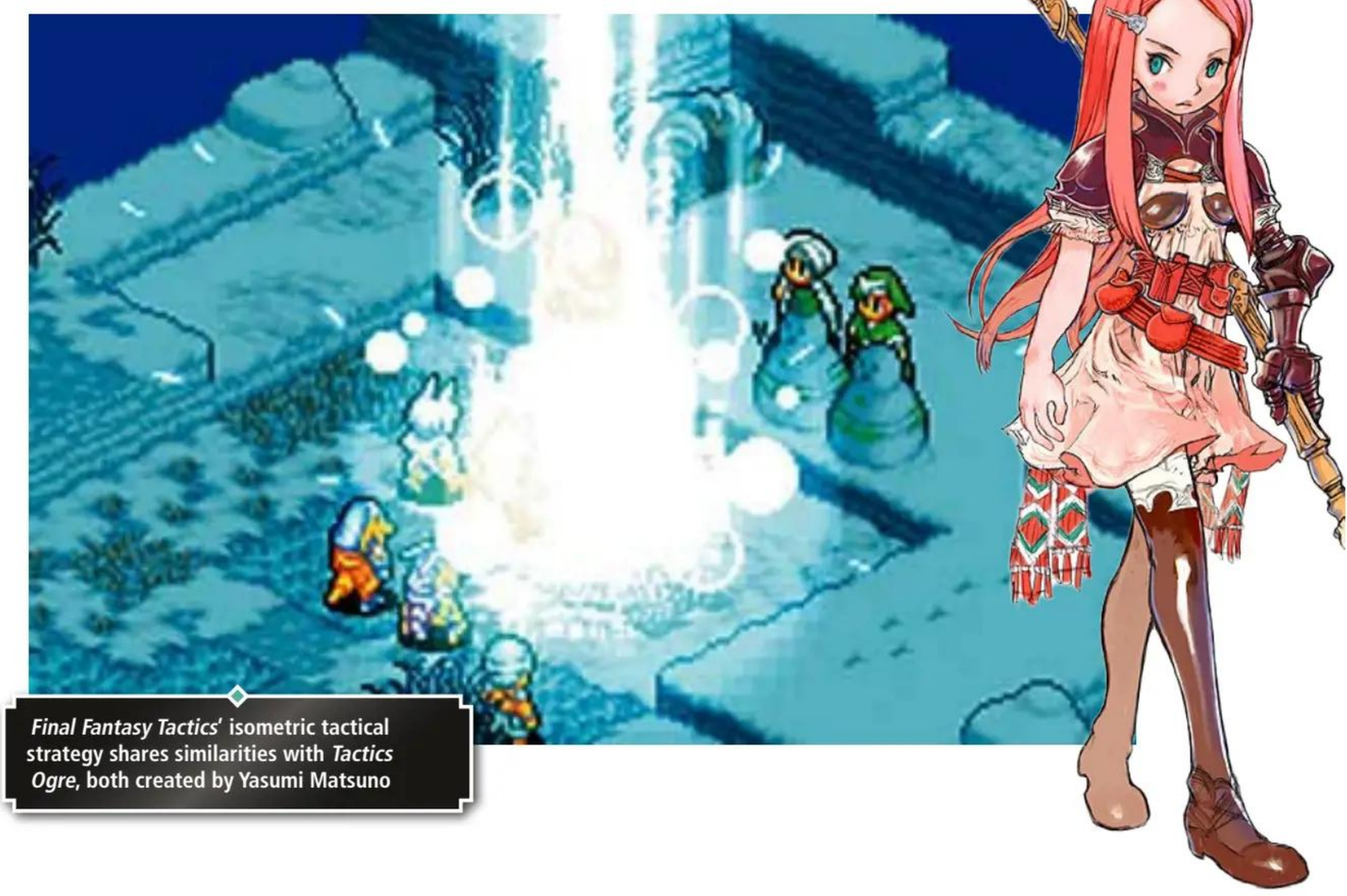
SPIN-OFFS, REMAKES AND REBIRTHS

Final Fantasy has expanded far beyond the main series of games. Here we delve into some of the highs, lows and downright weird Final Fantasy spin-offs

Final Fantasy may have reached its 16th entry but the number of games bearing that name runs much higher, and doesn't just include the rare instances of a numbered game getting a direct sequel. Yet while it's one of the most popular and beloved gaming brands, it wasn't ever really leveraged beyond the core RPGs in the same way that say Nintendo did for *Mario*.

Before merging with its former rival to become Square Enix, the SquareSoft of old did use the *Final Fantasy* name or its characters in other games, though with arguably less consideration. Very early on, it had simply been a case of brand recognition, which saw the first three Game Boy titles in the *SaGa* series released in North America under the name of *Final Fantasy Legend*. This was also the case with *Final Fantasy Adventure*, an action RPG in Japan called *Seiken Densetsu*, which was actually the beginning of the *Mana* series.

The first notable and acclaimed spin-off, 1997's *Final Fantasy Tactics*, would actually release in Japan the same year as the groundbreaking *Final Fantasy VII*. Yet while featuring familiar elements, in particular Chocobos as well as the design of the Black Mage with their blue robe and yellow pointy hat, this isometric turn-based tactics game with a complex narrative of class warfare felt very different. In fact, it would be the first game set in the world of Ivalice, which would next be the setting for *Vagrant Story*, an RPG that's not considered part of the *Final Fantasy* series.



Final Fantasy Tactics' isometric tactical strategy shares similarities with *Tactics Ogre*, both created by Yasumi Matsuno

Genre benders

Five Final Fantasy spin-offs that were far from RPGs

Chocobo Racing

Although Chocobo racing was one of the minigame highlights in *FFVII*, this standalone title is just a formulaic kart racer where the Chocobo runs wearing jet-blades while other *FF* characters ride karts or other vehicles. It was followed up with 2022's *Chocobo GP*, which was an improvement.

Dirge of Cerberus Final Fantasy VII

Not just an action spin-off, this was essentially a third-person shooter, where you play as the vampiric Vincent from *FFVII* set three years after the events of that game. While primarily played with an over-the-shoulder perspective, you can also switch to first-person.

Dissidia: Final Fantasy

Originally planned as a *Kingdom Hearts* spin-off, this is a 3D fighting game featuring *Final Fantasy* characters that's also stuffed with a surprising amount of RPG systems. Yet its flashy visuals made it a PSP hit. A later entry featuring more realistic visuals and three-on-three battles fared less well.

Theatrhythm: Final Fantasy

Being a series just as beloved for its music, a rhythm game made perfect sense. This 3DS spin-off is cleverly presented like a classic turn-based battle with a party of four characters. The difference is that each party member is at the end of a lane waiting to hit incoming notes.

Monster of the Deep: Final Fantasy XV

The weirdest of the lot, this *FFXV* spin-off involves hanging out with Noctis and his boys during their road trip while fishing. It's also played exclusively in PlayStation VR, though its simplicity meant it didn't meaningfully take advantage of the medium.

☞ But following a few quick and dirty cash-ins leveraging the Chocobo, it was really from 2003 onwards that Square was making a more conscious effort to expand on the *Final Fantasy* brand. This also happened to see the developer returning to Nintendo, which it had famously split from when making *FFVII*, making *Final Fantasy Tactics Advance* for the Game Boy Advance followed by the unusual co-op-based *Final Fantasy Crystal Chronicles* for GameCube, the latter developed by The Game Designers Studio, a team within Square but to assure Sony it wouldn't conflict with games made for PS2.

It was, however, as the newly branded Square Enix that *Final Fantasy*'s scope increased, where it wasn't just about making a new numbered entry but thinking about how that can be a vehicle to spin off more games. For this, it took inspiration from its most successful entry to date.

Compilation of *Final Fantasy VII* essentially encompassed the spin-off games (but also films and books) that were set in the world and continuity of *FFVII*. The first of these was *Before Crisis*, an action RPG set before the events of the game where you play as members of the Turks, covert operatives working for Shinra, depicting their battle against a more violent version of Avalanche. That was, however, a mobile game released exclusively in Japan.

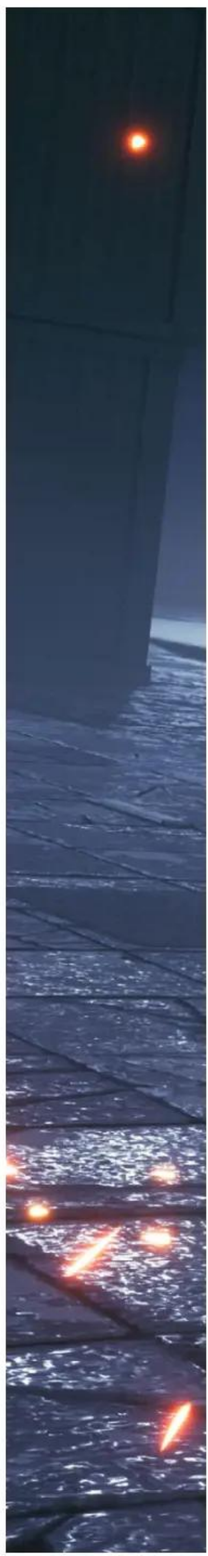
Subsequent *FFVII* spin-offs were more widely available as console games, though the PS2's *Dirge of Cerberus*, set after the game starring Vincent, and the PSP's *Crisis Core*, set before and starring Zack, were also action-oriented affairs to distinguish themselves from the turn-based conventions of the mainline series.

Crisis Core **was an early chance to encounter characters from the *FFVII* story with the kind of quality 3D graphics promised in the original game's cutscenes**

You can see how this line of thinking influenced later games. After the release of *Final Fantasy XII*, which returned to Ivalice first introduced in *FF Tactics* almost a decade before, Square Enix decided to create more spin-offs in that world naming it the Ivalice Alliance (though not including *Tactics Advance* released earlier). Again, these new games diverged from expectations of the mainline entry (arguably already itself a gamechanger with its Gambit system that eliminated random turn-based battles), such as direct sequel *Revenant Wings* that plays like a real-time strategy, starring Vaan and Penelo in their new life as sky pirates, and another turn-based tactical follow-up, *Final Fantasy Tactics A2: Grimoire of the Rift*. At the same time, the original *Tactics* also received an updated version for PSP, including cutscenes with a cel-shaded aesthetic and a much improved localisation delivered with the kind of Shakespearean script that has come to define Ivalice.

It's however with the advent of the next numbered game that Square Enix got even more ambitious and established a series going by *Fabula Nova Crystallis*. Beginning with *Final Fantasy XIII*, the idea was that the games within this sub-series would be thematically linked with a common mythos surrounding crystals and powerful god-like beings.

At a glance, it wasn't however that clear how it distinguished itself from other entries in the mainline series, which arguably also shared some commonality. But given that it began with *Final Fantasy XIII* and ended with *Final Fantasy XV*, which was originally announced as *Final Fantasy Versus XIII*, it arguably all tied into the world and mythology of *Final Fantasy XIII*. As part of this sub-series, there was also *Final Fantasy Type-0*, an



Crystal Chronicles' idiosyncratic local co-op gameplay tailored for GameCube makes its omission in the online-only remaster a glaring choice

While part of the *Fabula Nova Crystallis* universe, *Type-0*'s class of military cadets shares some similarity with the magic military school of *FFVIII*

action-based spin-off on PSP in a similar vein to *Crisis Core*, except you play a class of students, each with their own weapon and play style with the freedom to swap between three characters at any time. Perhaps as a way to remind you of their connection, when it received an HD port on PlayStation 4, it also came with a playable demo of *Final Fantasy XV*.

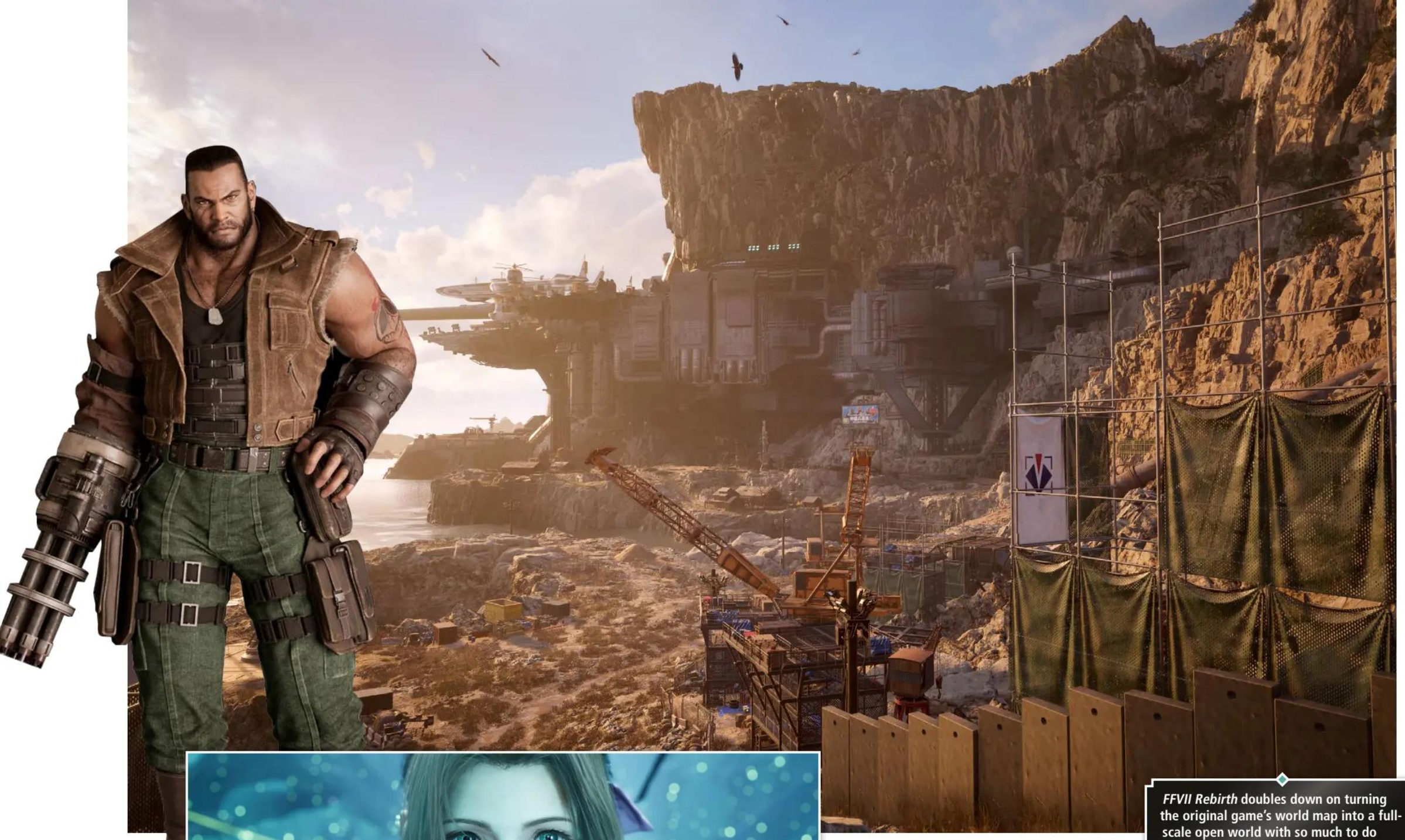
Interestingly, though perhaps also speaking to its long messy development period, *Final Fantasy XV* was the mainline game that received more spin-offs, including before, coinciding with, and after its release. It was truly a smorgasbord, including mobile pinball game *Justice Monsters Five* (itself also playable as a minigame in the final game), pixel art arcade brawler *A King's Tale*, a Pocket Edition with an abridged story and chibified characters (which could also run on Nintendo Switch), and not one but two very questionable freemium mobile strategy games.

> "Beyond the spin-offs attached to a sub-series, there were still many more offbeat titles"

Beyond the spin-offs attached to a sub-series, there were still many more offbeat titles bearing the *Final Fantasy* name, such as a WiiWare release that was actually spun off from *Crystal Chronicles* and played more like a cosy city-builder where battles took place offscreen. Plenty more were mobile games that were sadly never experienced by players outside of Japan, while server shutdowns have also rendered them to the aether.

But if the distinguishing feature of many *Final Fantasy* spin-offs was how they took on a more action-based approach to its core gameplay, the irony is that the mainline games have also moved further away from the tradition of turn-based

In combat, Cloud can switch from his default Operator mode to the less mobile but more powerful Punisher mode, which is also terrific for countering



FFVII Rebirth doubles down on turning the original game's world map into a full-scale open world with so much to do

The remakes' changes to certain plot points have also been controversial, particularly in the way it handles Aerith's fate

☞ battles or menu commands. A few years earlier and some might have easily confused the high-octane combat of *Final Fantasy XVI* as an action spin-off from PlatinumGames. *Stranger of Paradise* was however an exception, as it took inspiration from the punishing combat and dark fantasy of *Dark Souls*. It was also technically a retelling of the very first *Final Fantasy*, even paying tribute to the iconic image of four silhouetted warriors looking back at the distant castle they just left in the original's title screen, albeit saddled with an edgy tone that injected some unintentional hilarity to proceedings.

It's here that we come back to Square Enix's biggest preoccupation, which in turn takes us back to the *Compilation of Final Fantasy VII*. While the publisher had been moving onto other games and sub-series, it was far from done with its biggest success story. If anything, the computer-animated movie *Advent Children*, followed by a tech demo of its new Crystal Tools engine that stunningly recreated the game's opening sequence only kept up a feverish demand for a remake that fans would have to wait many more years for.

Square Enix would also dedicate itself to not just reissuing older games but giving them a new lick of paint as well as quality-of-life updates, such as the Pixel Remasters of the 2D titles, or *Final Fantasy VIII Remastered* and *Final Fantasy XII: The Zodiac Age*'s more detailed and high-resolution textures. But something as beloved and ambitious as *FFVII* required more than just a prettier game that fans had played before.

> "It shows how much love the developers have for the game, its world and characters"

At Sony's E3 stage in 2015, a decade after that Crystal Tools tech demo, fans finally got the news they were waiting for when a remake of *FFVII* was confirmed, which would reimagine the classic story with Unreal Engine 4 and introduce entirely new mechanics, from a real-time action combat system to fully voiced characters, which in turn meant a rewritten and much more fleshed out script that was a stark contrast to some of the original's awkward translated lines. It nonetheless also retained the essence of the original, such as how the combat adapted the Active Time Battle gauge now used for performing actions like unique skills or using items, as well as enhancing gear and learning new spells with Materia.

However, it also meant that *FFVII Remake* wouldn't just be one game but retold over several: a trilogy. The biggest surprise was that the first part would only take place in the dystopian cyberpunk city of Midgar. As iconic a location as it is, also home to the slums of Sector 7 and resistance group Avalanche, as well as totalitarian corporation Shinra, this was however ultimately just the first few hours of the original game.

What that meant was fleshing out the story significantly, making even a minor character like Avalanche member Jessie have practically a whole chapter for her backstory. There were also elements of player choice, such as choosing what outfit Cloud should wear in an extended and far more glamorous realising of the Honey Bee Inn sequence. Meanwhile, the slums and its outskirts were not just populated with enemies but with the same quantity of side quests and minigames that you would

expect of any feature-length standalone 30 to 40-hour RPG.

There were concessions to only telling the story up to when Cloud and the party leave Midgar. For instance, Red XIII, who you only encounter when rescuing Aerith from the Shrina Building, is so late in the game that he joins as a guest character rather than as a fully fleshed party member. It also meant showing its hand very early on by revealing the game's big bad, Sephiroth, well before he was revealed in the original game.

Of course, by this point it would have dawned on fans the sly intention behind explicitly having 'Remake' in the title. This wasn't just following the beats of the original story but had its own meta in the form of swarms of misty grey-cloaked figures known as Whispers, arbiters of fate that appear to prevent destiny from altering its course, that is ensuring the story of *FFVII* plays out as we expect. This can also be seen in a sequence when a character is suddenly killed, which didn't happen in the original story, only to be miraculously revived.

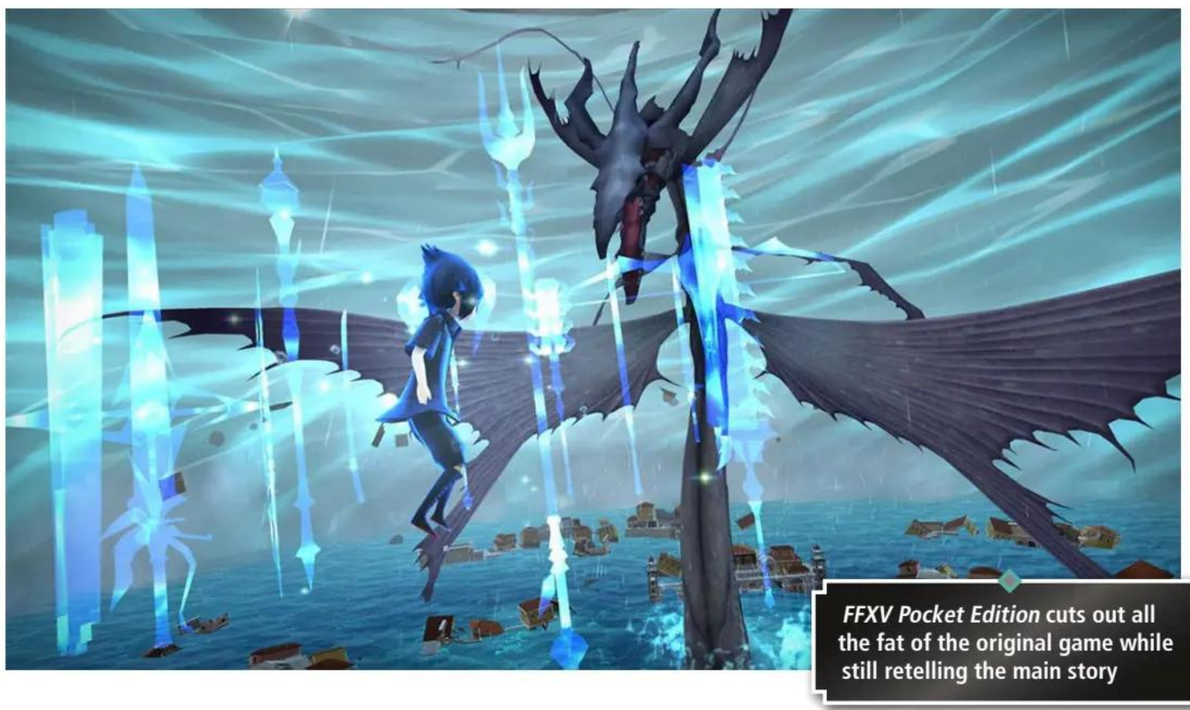
This part of the narrative would be pivotal in *Remake*'s conclusion when our heroes don't just do battle with Shinra's goons or Sephiroth but fate itself. It was a symbolic moment that upended expectations and left things wide open to the possibility that much more in the story can change from what we had known before, allowing other characters thought to have died to come back.

For some, it felt like a controversial and unnecessary addition borne out of a desire from the developers not wanting to simply retell the same story, but which also risked diluting an already beloved narrative with all its highs and lows. On the other hand, it meant both those familiar with the story and newcomers would also be waiting with bated breath for what could happen next.

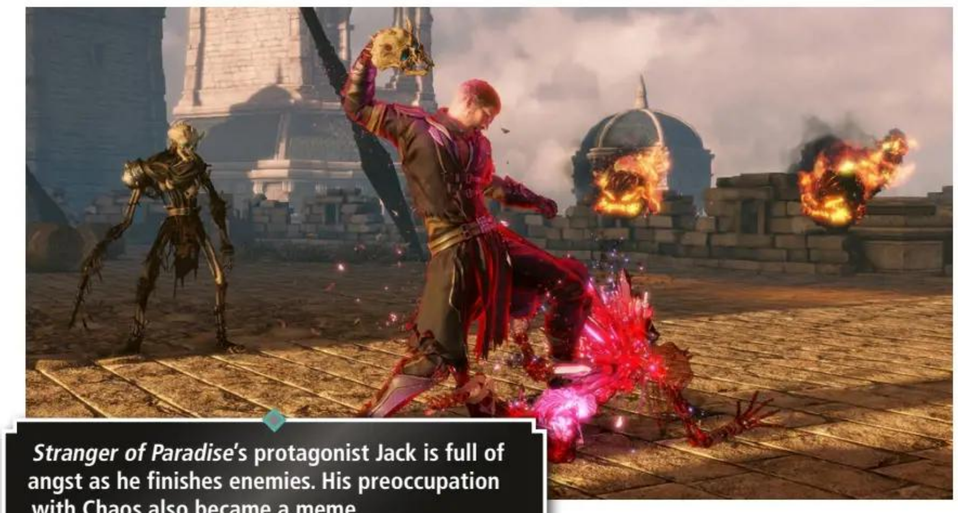
Its follow-up *Final Fantasy VII Rebirth* went further by blowing away fan expectations of what Square Enix was capable of. Midgar may have been more fleshed out but was still made up of individual components. But once players wandered out to the Grasslands, it was apparent that you weren't just traversing a scaled-down overworld map like in the original game but actually a complete open world, where every region was packed full of activities. Content that was only optional in the original game, such as party members like Yuffie (who also starred in a standalone episode for the PS5 version of *Remake*) or the town of Gongaga were now integrated in the main story.

Those with less free time and who prefer a story with tighter editing may critcise *Rebirth* as being bloated and indulgent. Yet it's also hard to knock when there is so much depth and variety to it all. Take the Protorelic Phenomenon quests in each region, where each has its own bespoke minigame, including one that even riffs on *FFXII* acclaimed yet never repeated (until now) Gambit system. Then there's side quests you'll take on just to raise your relationship level with party members, all for the sole purpose of determining who you'll go on a date with at the Gold Saucer.

It shows how much love the developers have for the game, its world and characters, making *Rebirth* not just an extravagant retelling but a theme park and celebration of all things *Final Fantasy*. It might also be fair to say that this remake project has been the product of all the spin-offs the series has had over the years, from the most leftfield and most obscure references to the more action-focused gameplay associated with modern game design. The question is perhaps whether the trilogy's concluding entry or any future spin-off can ever reach the same maximalist peak as *Rebirth*.



FFXV Pocket Edition **cuts out all the fat of the original game while still retelling the main story**



Stranger of Paradise**'s protagonist Jack is full of angst as he finishes enemies. His preoccupation with Chaos also became a meme**

First the worst

How Final Fantasy: Mystic Quest tried (and failed) to simplify the series

1992's *Final Fantasy: Mystic Quest* was technically the first *Final Fantsy* spin-off, and was in fact made for North America, where it was released first. It was also the first game with the *Final Fantasy* name to be released in Europe.

While it follows the series' original narrative template of saving the world by reclaiming legendary crystals, it also makes some significant departures aimed at simplifying the RPG. Instead of a party, you play as a sole protagonist, Benjamin. Although you traverse a map in a top-down perspective, the world map is a set path rather than free roam. You do however have more actions that share some similarities with *The Legend of Zelda*, such as using weapons outside of battle that help explorations, like bombs to open sealed doors or using an axe to chop down a tree in your path. More importantly, there are no random battles, but enemies are visible and stationary in a dungeon that you can choose to engage.

Although its simplified approach might have appealed to younger players, it was disparaged by hardcore fans, seeming a step back especially after *Final Fantasy IV* released the previous year had moved the series forward. On the other hand, the music by Ryuji Sasai and Yasuhiro Kawakami was well regarded, and even featured in *Theatrhythm*.

TOP 15 FINAL FANTASY CHARACTERS

The legendary, and sometimes underrated, heroes that have defeated evil and saved the world throughout the franchise

Cloud Strife

Final Fantasy VII compilation

Ex-SOLDIER Cloud is instantly recognisable with his spiky blond hair and huge Buster Sword. Cloud starts the game cold and confident but as the story progresses, he feels compassion for both the planet and other characters. He leads the party in the battle against Shinra and Sephiroth and is involved in a love triangle with Tifa and Aerith. Cloud is a strong character but his personality begins to soften as more of his past begins to unravel and he discovers that his memories may not be all they seem. One thing he will always remember though, he ain't your bro.

Balthier *Final Fantasy XII*

Balthier is a sky-pirate who pilots the airship Strahl with his co-pilot, a Viera called Fran. Both make their grand entrance attempting to steal magicite from the Royal Palace, but are just beaten to it by Vaan, before joining forces. Balthier battles equipped with guns but is equally adept with other weapons, however, he is not best employed as a mage due to his low magic power. Balthier comes off as charming and suave but as time goes on, his deeper backstory emerges. He's debatably the game's breakout character and its most fondly remembered.

Firion *Final Fantasy II*

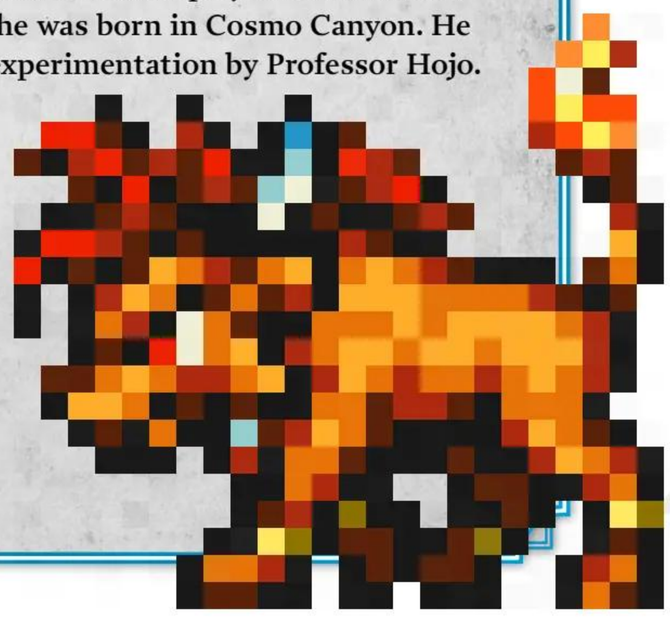
After the original's nameless protagonists, Firion strolls into *Final Fantasy II* as the main hero. His Crimson Sword slices through the game's cover art, accurately depicting his swashbuckling and heroic style.

Firion is alongside his childhood friends Maria, Guy and Leon when they are injured by the empire's formidable black knights at the start of the game. From here, the youths prove themselves to join the Wild Rose Rebellion against the empire. Firion leads the party and shows immense bravery, leading his team onto the enemy Dreadnought and even into a tornado, as well as showing compassion to the defected Leon.

4

Red XIII *Final Fantasy VII compilation*

Looking like a mix between a wolf and a lion, Red XIII is undeniably cool. One of a handful of animal playable characters, Red's real name is Nanaki and he was born in Cosmo Canyon. He joins the party after escaping experimentation by Professor Hojo. Red initially intends to only accompany the party until they reach his hometown but, after learning the truth about his father, continues on with them to save the planet from the coming calamity. He is a loyal member of the group and a good all-rounder in battle, with some brilliant Limit Breaks.

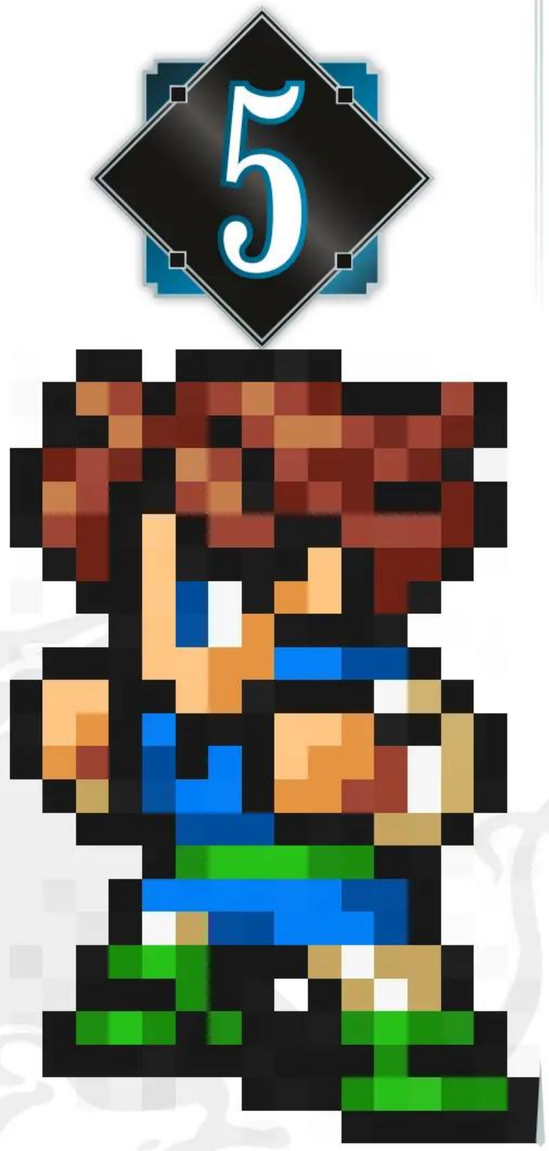


5

Bartz Klauser *Final Fantasy V*

Final Fantasy V's hero was orphaned at 17 and left his hometown of Lix to travel the world. On his journey he saves Princess Lenna from a goblin attack and this is where the game's adventure begins.

Tall and slim, Bartz has a buoyant persona and a positive and easy-going outlook on life. He leads the group but is often helped in his decisions by his loyal Chocobo, Boko. In battle, he is a Light Warrior, a heavy hitter but can also be a skilled mage.



"Looking like a mix between a wolf and a lion, Red XIII is undeniably cool"

6

Vivi Ornitier *Final Fantasy IX*

This innocent and kind-hearted Black Mage's search for identity is powerful and emotional. His story is almost as powerful as his prowess in battle, with Vivi accessing an arsenal of strong black magic from Flare to Doomsday and imbuing Steiner's sword with magic. The clumsy Black Mage's story goes deeper as the game progresses as his relationship with others of his kin makes him question his very existence and he often relies on others in the party to keep him upbeat. His clash with the Black Waltz on the cargo ship is one of the series' great moments.

7

Terra Branford *Final Fantasy VI*

Final Fantasy VI has a huge roster of playable characters. Perhaps the biggest fan-favourite among them is the one you play as first, Terra. Terra starts the game as a brainwashed soldier for the evil Gestahlian Empire that is intent on utilising her skill with magic for their gain. Early on, Terra is released from the empire's control and becomes a valuable member of the party, utilising her magic and ability to trance. Story-wise, she has a shrouded past, which is connected to the game's magical summons, Espers. 'Terra's Theme' from the game's soundtrack is also an all-timer.

8

Lightning

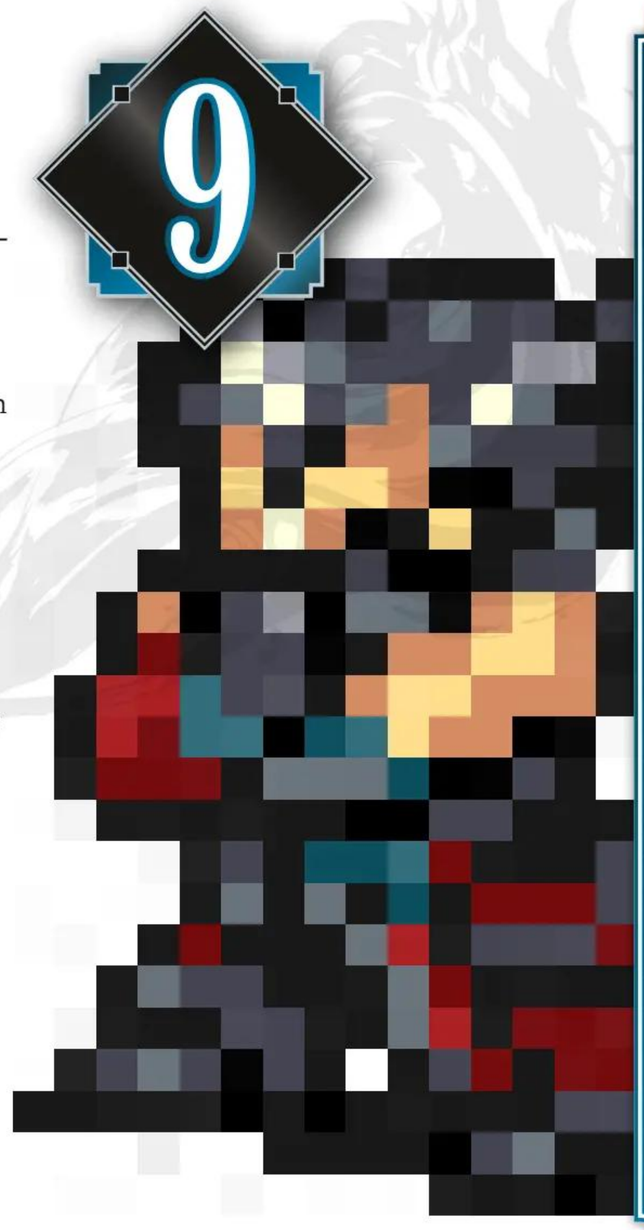
Final Fantasy XIII, Final Fantasy XIII-2, Lightning Returns: Final Fantasy XII

Lightning is the iconic lead character of *Final Fantasy XIII* and its sequels, which make up the *Lightning Saga*. Wielding a gunblade, she has balanced stats in battle but is particularly adept at speed and magic. Lightning is the second primary female protagonist after Terra in *Final Fantasy VI* and her prowess in battle, as well as her numerous guises, make her a popular figure in the franchise. Real name Claire, she is fiercely independent, which can come off as cold. Lightning becomes less isolated from her companions as time goes on, but always maintains her immense bravery and steely determination.

Auron *Final Fantasy X*

A legendary warrior who acts as a guide and a guardian to Yuna and the rest of the party. Auron watched over Tidus in Zanarkand and accompanied him through Spira in the battle against Sin. A heavy-hitter, Auron's katana and Bushido abilities do great damage and weaken enemy stats as he makes light-work of larger and armoured fiends. The former warrior monk is a man of few words but does dispense vital wisdom to the younger members of the party and rallies his comrades with a speech for the ages before the battle against Yunalesca.

"A heavy-hitter, Auron's katana and Bushido abilities do great damage"



Rydia of Mist

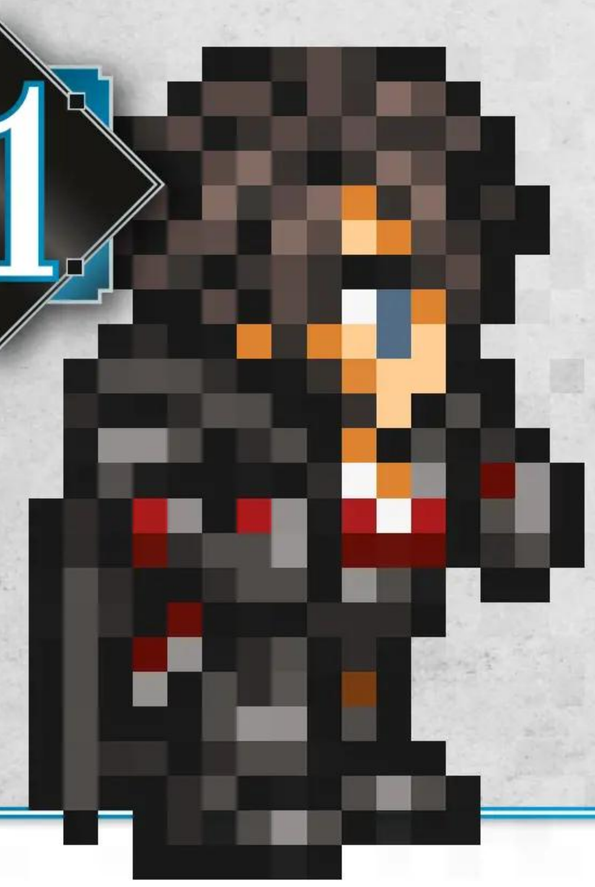
Final Fantasy IV, Final Fantasy IV – Interlude, Final Fantasy IV: The After Years

We first find Rydia as a child amongst the destroyed wreckage of her hometown of Mist. Enraged at the destruction of her village and the death of her mother, she summons Titan in a battle with Cecil and Kain. Instantly recognisable with her long green hair, Rydia and her tribe are intrinsically bonded to Eidolons, the summoned beasts in *Final Fantasy IV*. Rydia is an expert summoner as well as a talented Black Magic user but this is offset by low HP. She is a more than useful party member in the battle against Golbez.

Clive Rosfield

Final Fantasy XVI

The star of the most recent *Final Fantasy* is a force of nature. An expert swordsman, he is also a proficient magic user and can use Eikonic Feats and Abilities to turn the tide in battles. Since he was a child, Clive's close friend is Torgal, a loyal frost wolf who grew up with Clive and his brother Joshua in Rosaria. The loyal Torgal joins Clive in battles and alongside Ambrosia, Clive's white Chocobo steed. Clive also has a close relationship with Jill, who grew up with the brothers and later aids him in battle.



Locke Cole *Final Fantasy VI*

A kind-hearted treasure hunter – just don't call him a thief – Locke finds and protects Terra in Narshe at the start of the game. He works as a scout for the Returners and dons a disguise to infiltrate the empire-held South Figaro. This is where he meets Celes, who he opens up to after being closed off from relationships due to his lost love, Rachel. Locke is friendly and jovial with others, as alluded to in his buoyant theme song. He is a key member of the party and is able to steal items in battle, fighting with daggers and swords.

13

Gladiolus *Final Fantasy XV*

A beast of a man, Gladiolus accompanies Noctis, Ignis and Prompto on their adventures through Eos. He oozes charisma but remains headstrong in the boys' aim to reclaim the throne for Prince Noctis. Gladiolus is a fierce warrior in battle, brandishing a huge sword and unwilling to give up. He is a tank, boasting a high HP and defence stats but little to no magic. As well as being part of the team in the main game, he is also the star of his own DLC, *Episode Gladiolus*.

> "He oozes charisma but remains headstrong in the boys' aim to reclaim the throne for Prince Noctis"

14

Laguna Loire *Final Fantasy VIII*

A cheerful and bubbly Galbadian soldier who would rather be a journalist but instead fires a machine gun in battle. Laguna's exploits are told through dream sequences that appear to be previous to the main story beats. Along with his buddies, Kiros and Ward, his escapades are a fun aside from Squall's journey as the trio navigate their way through a war. Laguna's initial love interest is Julia Heartilly but they are kept apart by the Sorceress War, with Laguna serving Galbadia against Esthar. Laguna's story intertwines with Squall and his outgoing and positive nature are a popular counterbalance to the moody and cold Squall.

15

Sazh Katzroy

Final Fantasy XIII, Final Fantasy XIII-2, Lightning Returns: Final Fantasy XIII

The happy-go-lucky Sazh is a kind and generous chatterbox but also the father of the group. A Chocobo chick lives in his hair and accompanies Sazh throughout the game. The chick was bought for his young son, Dajh, who Sazh is a single parent to. Underneath the former airship pilot's bouncy exterior lies a more conflicted personality. Dual pistols are his weapon of choice, snuggly fitted into holsters on his trousers. Sazh's Blitz ability unleashes a hail of bullets against a number of enemies.

And some of the worst...

Not every character is a hit, here are some who are considered duds

Shadow

Final Fantasy VI's Shadow's throw ability can cause tremendous damage and he also has a cute dog called Interceptor. However, he frustratingly leaves the party frequently and randomly.

Quina Quen

This Blue Mage from *Final Fantasy IX* is only interested in food and eating. Some see it as welcome comic relief from the game's heavy themes but some just see them as pointless.

Wakka

Wakka initially seems like good fun, sharing Tidus's love of blitzball. However, he is openly hostile to Rikku and the Al Bhed, despite learning his errors by the end of *Final Fantasy X*.

Vaan

One of the least popular characters, *Final Fantasy XII*'s protagonist does get some unfair flak but he is childish and somewhat uninspiring and is in the shadow of other characters.

Amarant

Amarant comes too late into *Final Fantasy IX* to have an impact. His negative attitude and undeveloped storyline aren't great either. Couldn't we have had Beatrix instead?

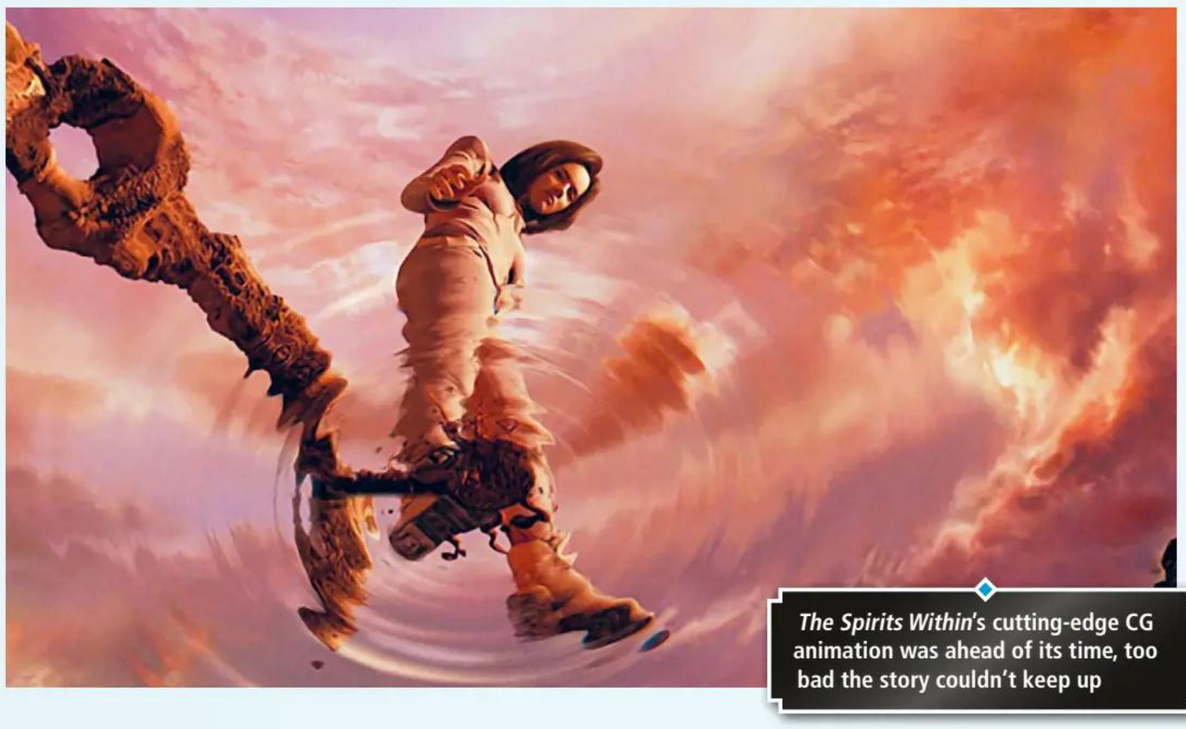
FINAL FANTASY

AN EXPANDING UNIVERSE

What started as a single NES game in the '80s has spawned into a huge multimedia adventure

When *Final Fantasy* creator Hironobu Sakaguchi was a young man, before he'd ever set foot in the offices at SquareSoft, where he'd change gaming history, he wanted to be a rock star. Since its very beginning, *Final Fantasy* wanted to be more than a videogame. Not that being a videogame isn't enough, but that Sakaguchi had a vision for something that crossed mediums, providing cinematic experiences to a videogame industry that had been birthed out of arcade machines more concerned with munching quarters than telling stories.

You can see it in *Final Fantasy*'s dramatic opening sequence and a title drop that doesn't happen until the player completes the game's first dungeon. The *Star Wars*-esque opening scrawl promises an experience inspired by film and literature — from a creator who understood games could provide narrative experiences just as rich as any of the classics.



The Spirits Within's cutting-edge CG animation was ahead of its time, too bad the story couldn't keep up

So, it's no surprise that, after becoming a global megahit, *Final Fantasy* broke out of the gaming world and spawned experiences in many, many other creative spaces. From movies to card games, books to remix albums, *Final Fantasy* is everywhere.

Silver Screen

While *Final Fantasy*'s best remembered and most impactful silver screen debut happened in 2001, the series' animation debut happened years earlier with *Final Fantasy: Legend of the Crystals*, a four-episode sequel to *Final Fantasy V* released in 1994, well before the series reached massive popularity outside Japan. Set 200 years after the events of the game, *Legend of the Crystals* follows Prettz, a precocious young guy, and the motorcycle-riding descendant of Bartz (*Final Fantasy V*'s protagonist) named Linally. When a powerful wizard steals Cid's brain in an attempt to gain the power of The Void, Prettz and Linally must team up with a ragtag group of sky pirates, engineers, and even Cid himself (returned as a ghost) to save the day.

Sometime in 1997, no doubt due to the enormous global response to *Final Fantasy VII*, though, Hironobu Sakaguchi finally fulfilled his lifelong dream: he was going to make a movie. Directed by Sakaguchi, and based on a script by Al Reinert and Jeff Vintar, *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within* released in July 2001, just days before the Japanese release of *Final Fantasy X*, and bombed horrifically. Panned by audiences and critics, the film, which cost $137m to produce, grossed $85m at the box office, and led to dramatic consequences for Sakaguchi, Square Pictures (the film studio ☞

"Advent Children explores a post-Shinra world, and features some brilliant action scenes"

Set during the events of *Final Fantasy XV*, *Kingsglaive* fills important plot gaps

spun out of the parent company to produce films), and Square itself.

Not long after *The Spirits Within*'s catastrophic release, Square announced its first financial loss, and Sakaguchi resigned from the company and disappeared from the videogame industry for several years.

So, what went wrong? Pretty much everything. To begin with, *The Spirits Within* was a near-future science fiction story set on a post-apocalyptic Earth — a far cry from the science-fantasy adventures driving over a decade of success for the game series. Though the 3D tech used in the film was praised, with famed critic Roger Ebert being a surprising fan, and Square was quick to brag about its 'digital actors' (there were plans for the main character, Aki Ross, to become the world's first photorealistic animated actor, starring across various films), the plot felt trapped by cliches and bore little resemblance to the series overall.

Though it ended Sakaguchi's career at Square and almost sank the company, an eventual merger with rival Enix eventually led to more films from Square, including a questionable 2005 sequel to *Final Fantasy VII* called *Advent Children*, which explores a post-Shinra world, and features some brilliant action scenes. 2016's *Kingsglaive: Final Fantasy XV*, an essential accompanying story that runs parallel to the opening events of *Final Fantasy XV*, was accompanied by an online animation series called *Brotherhood: Final Fantasy XV*. Together these two optional-but-not-really experiences fill in vital plot elements for a game that's full of holes. As an experiment in cross-media storytelling, *Final Fantasy XV* produced some beautiful work, but ultimately being required to watch various films and online mini-sodes compromised the core narrative experience in the game. Somewhat predictably, all of Square Enix's screen-based projects shared *The Spirits Within*'s main strengths and flaws: gorgeous visuals and poor stories.

What Could Have Been

While many *Final Fantasy* tales have made it to screens large and small, one of the projects that got away was a cartoon sequel to *Final Fantasy IX* called *Black Mages Legacy*. Purportedly, this follow-up, set a generation after the game's events, would have followed Vivi's children as the search for a cure to a mysterious affliction leads them outside the cosy comfort of Alexandria into the world fans know and love from the game.

Final Fantasy IX is well loved by fans in large part due to its highly likeable cast of characters and cosy fantasy world setting, making it a perfect fit for a warm and adventurous cartoon. Rather than trying to adapt the original game, *Black Mages Legacy* being a pseudo-sequel tying deeply into the game's most popular character, the clumsy Black Mage Vivi Ornitier, would have been the perfect fit for existing fans and newcomers alike. Design documents leaked in early 2025 show a visually delightful animation style, and a story and cast that feel perfectly understanding of what made *Final Fantasy IX* so beloved in the first place.

First revealed in 2021 by *Gigantosaurus*-creator Cyber Group Studios and Square Enix, *Black Mages Legacy* would've introduced a whole new generation to *Final Fantasy IX*'s beloved world, and, no doubt, would have helped set the stage for the long-rumoured remake. Unfortunately, the show was quietly cancelled (and news about the remake has dried up in recent years). In 2024, Cyber Group Studios entered a judicial recovery process for insolvency, and a French court ordered its assets liquidated in 2025, leaving any hope for the adaptation's survival at the whims of whoever acquires the rights during the liquidation.

In Your Hands

Since the introduction of Triple Triad in *Final Fantasy VIII*, card games have been an integral part of the series' oeuvre, and impressed most recently with Queen's Blood, a digital-only collectible card game in *Final Fantasy VII Rebirth* that hooked many players just as deeply as the main campaign.

As videogames boomed in the '90s, so did trading card games, spurred on by the

Lofi remix albums like Rifti Beats' *Chocobo & Chill* bring new vibes to your favourite *FF* tracks

unprecedented success of Magic: The Gathering, which no doubt helped inspire *Final Fantasy*'s card games and trading mechanics. So, it's only fitting that *Final Fantasy* got its very own trading card game in 2011 thanks to Square Enix and developer Hobby Japan. Initially released only in Japan, Final Fantasy Trading Card Game (FFTCG) found a worldwide audience with a global 2016 re-release that's still going strong, with the latest expansion, August 2025's Gunslinger in the Abyss, introducing 130 new cards to the game with art and characters spanning the entire series.

Similar to Wizards of the Coast's Magic: the Gathering, FFTCG players spend a resource called Crystal Points to play various characters and monsters from across the game's history — split across four card types: Forward, Backup, Monster, and Summon. Across various formats, including Constructed (which uses decks you've built ahead of time) and Limited (which uses decks you construct from drafted booster packs or sealed kits), players battle each other in the hope of emerging victorious.

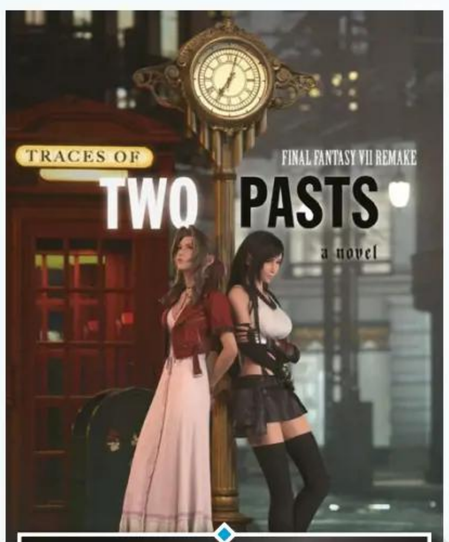
To fully cap off a full circle moment, Square Enix and Wizards of the Coast released a full *Final Fantasy* expansion for Magic in June 2025. With hundreds of new cards usable in every Magic format, this set was instantly beloved, and we've got a full breakdown in the sidebar on this page.

If card games aren't your thing, or you're looking for some way to enjoy *Final Fantasy* in your hands while riding solo, several *Final Fantasy* novels have been released since the series' first introduction in the '80s. Among those are *Final Fantasy VII Remake: Traces of Two Pasts* by longtime *Final Fantasy* writer Kazushige Nojima, which released in Japan in 2021 and in English in 2023, and explores the lives of young Aerith Gainsborough and Tifa Lockhart, Jun Eishima's *Final Fantasy XV: The Dawn of the Future*, which unravels some ultimately cancelled DLC for the ill-fated 15th *Final Fantasy*, and *Final Fantasy VII: The Kids Are Alright: A Turks Side Story*, also by Nojima, which introduced two of *Final Fantasy VII Remake*'s new characters: Kyrie and Leslie.

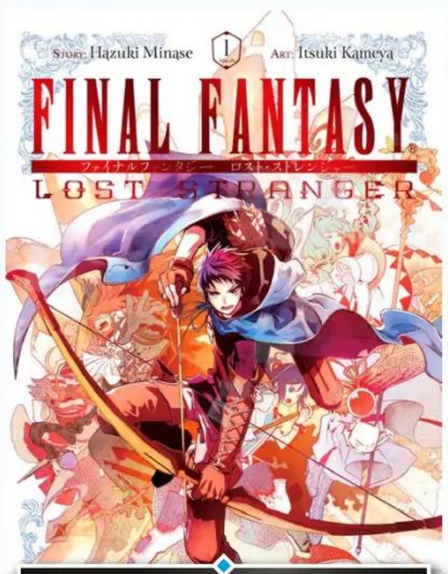
Or, maybe manga's more up your street, and *Final Fantasy*'s got you covered there, too. First released in Japan in November 2017, and the following year in English, Hazuki Minase and Itsuki Kameya's *Final Fantasy Lost Stranger* is an isekai manga that tells the story of Shogo Sasaki, a fictional *Final Fantasy* fan (and Square Enix employee) that gets teleported to a *Final Fantasy*-style world after a fatal car accident. Its 12th volume was released in English in September 2025, and the 13th volume was recently released in Japan.

Dream Big

When an early-20s Hironobu Sakaguchi walked into SquareSoft with dreams of making movies, it might've seemed precocious, but, three decades later, it seems prescient. Though his own personal film project was a failure, *Final Fantasy* has proven its range across a huge variety of creative mediums and products. For a series created with the ambition to explore cinematic narratives in videogames, it feels like *Final Fantasy*'s got a lot more story to tell.



Kazushige Nojima's *Traces of Two Pasts* explores the origins of two of *Final Fantasy VII*'s fan favourites



Journey to the magical world of *Final Fantasy* in this isekai manga

MAGIC
THE GATHERING
13+
FINAL FANTASY
Cloud, Midgar Mercenary
Legendary Creature — Human Soldier Mercenary
When Cloud enters, search your library for an Equipment card, reveal it, put it into your hand, then shuffle.
As long as Cloud is equipped, if an ability of Cloud or an Equipment attached to it triggers, that ability triggers an additional time.
2/1

Final Fantasy x Magic: The Gathering

Gather your party and set forth

Card games have been an integral part of *Final Fantasy* since the late '90s, no doubt buoyed by the unprecedented popularity of Wizards of the Coast's Magic: The Gathering. First released in 1993, Magic's compulsive collectibility made its way into *Final Fantasy* with the inclusion of Triple Triad in *Final Fantasy VIII*, a game which remains a staple in the exceedingly popular *Final Fantasy XIV*. So, it was pretty much a no-brainer for Square Enix and Wizards of the Coast to collaborate on a *Final Fantasy*-themed Magic set when the world's most popular card game started exploring external IPs with its 'Universes Beyond' line.

Released in June 2025, Magic: The Gathering – Final Fantasy is a full-blown expansion adding hundreds of cards to Magic. Whether you play casually online with Magic: The Gathering Arena, competitively in local events, or around a kitchen table with some mates on Commander night, this set brings all your favourite *Final Fantasy* characters, spells and locations to life within Magic's popular gameplay for one of the most celebrated expansions in the game's history. Play with them on their own, or combine Cloud, Terra, and co with all your other Magic cards, because there's no wrong way to play with this full-circle collaboration from two of gaming's greats.

Flash Photography
Sorcery
You may cast this spell as though it had flash if it targets a permanent you control.
Create a token that's a copy of target permanent.
Flashback
"Gimme a pose I'll never forget!"

Locke, Treasure Hunter
Legendary Creature — Human Rogue
Locke can't be blocked by creatures with greater power.
Mug — Whenever Locke attacks, each player mills a card. If a land card was milled this way, create a Treasure token. Until end of turn, you may cast a spell from among those cards.
2/3

Search for Dagger
Enchantment
Whenever your commander enters or attacks, look at the top six cards of your library. You may reveal a legendary creature card from among them and put it into your hand. Put the rest on the bottom of your library in a random order.
"Dagger is more important to me than anything else."

The Destined Black Mage
Legendary Creature — Human Wizard
Deathtouch
, : Another target creature you control gains deathtouch until end of turn.
Whenever you cast a noncreature spell, The Destined Black Mage deals 1 damage to each opponent. If you have a full party, it deals 3 damage to each opponent instead.
3/2

Adobe Stock

TOP 15 FINAL FANTASY BOSS BATTLES

A rundown of the best tough as nails boss battles from demons to giant robots and even trains

1

Chaos *Final Fantasy I*

The final big bad of the first game. Chaos is a demon with access to a number of high-damage spells which he'll batter your party with. He also has the ability to heal himself. Your own high-level healing spells and the best equipment are a must to defend yourself here but your own offensive magic may prove ineffective due to Chaos's high magic defence. The Warriors of Light may have to rely on their trusty melee weapons for this final battle.

3

Demon's Gate *Final Fantasy VII*

Debatably the first truly difficult boss in the game, Demon's Gate bursts out of a wall at the end of the Temple of the Ancients. With high magic defence, this battle is no pushover, and players must resort to physical attacks. Demon Rush is a devastating move that causes high damage to all party members so buff up your characters to withstand it. Demon's Gate is similar to Demon Wall from *Final Fantasy IV* and the battle has extra gravitas as it's the last one with Aerith before she leaves the party.

2

Gizamaluke *Final Fantasy IX*

Zidane, Freya and Vivi travel through Gizamaluke's Grotto en route to Burmecia. The previously friendly master of the Grotto has come under the control of Zorn and Thorn and rises out of the water to fight the party. Gizamaluke is a tough cookie so pick up Quina beforehand to give you more of a chance. Gizamaluke will smash into the party causing physical damage, flood you with water and also silence your magic casters. Once the boss is defeated, the party hurries on to Burmecia but the player switches to Dagger and Steiner's route through the South Gate.

4

Lost Number *Final Fantasy VII*

It's not just Vincent Valentine that's hidden deep in Nibelheim's Shinra Mansion. When the right combination for the mansion's safe is entered, Lost Number rushes out. The boss has three forms that are resistant to different types of attacks so rotate between physical and magical attacks to do the most damage. The strategy works the other way too, maximise either your physical or magical defence to best withstand the attacks.

Lost Number is optional but, despite being tough, the spoils are many. When defeated, the player has access to Red XIII's ultimate Limit Break, the Odin summon and can recruit Vincent.

5

Seymour *Final Fantasy X*

Seymour is fought at various points during the game but the three-phase first battle in Macalania Temple is the most iconic. After learning that he killed his father, the party is determined to stop Seymour once and for all. This leads into a battle against the Maester and two Guado guardians. Once he is weakened, Seymour will call his Aeon, Anima, who deals massive damage with Pain. If the party can survive Anima, Seymour appears once again for one final clash. Once he is felled, Yuna and her guardians flee pursued by Guado guards. Bonus points for the great battle theme too.

6

Abadon *Final Fantasy VIII*

Squall and the party have to make their way through the Great Salt Lake on the way to Esthar City. While traversing the flats, Abadon comes out of nowhere, ready for a fight. The giant skeleton-like creature starts hunched, flaying your trio with its claws and tongue. Abadon will later rise to a huge height, boosting its defences and casting magic.

Veteran *Final Fantasy* players will know that undead monsters have one fatal weakness: use healing items and spells to inflict heavy damage and to blast Abadon into pieces.

7

Deathgaze *Final Fantasy VI*

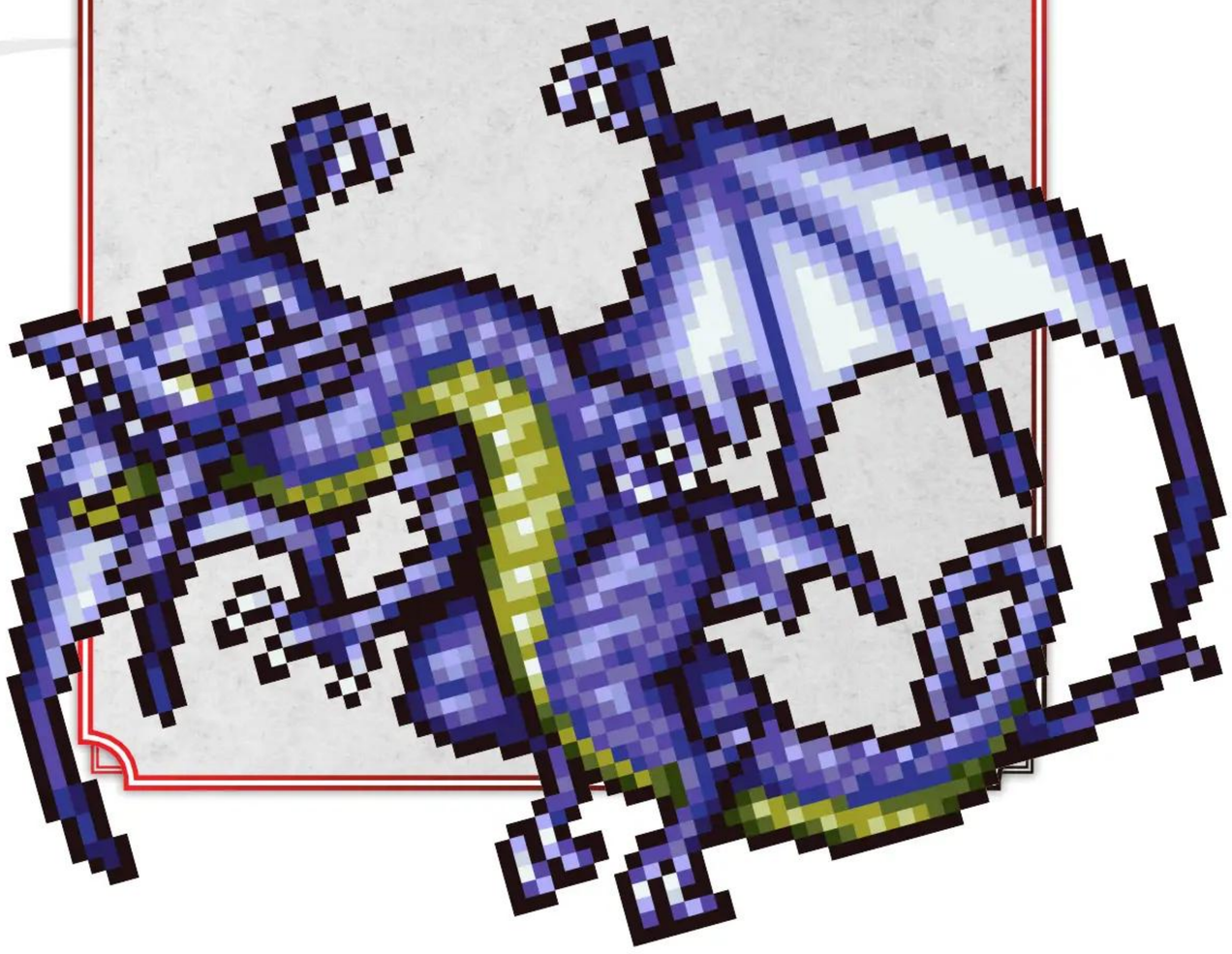
Soaring around the World of Ruin, Deathgaze will attack the Falcon airship when encountered. Packing a punch with its high-level magic and instant death spells, the party is best advised to reply in kind. Deathgaze will flee the field of battle when enough health is taken off it, reappearing at random times when piloting the airship.

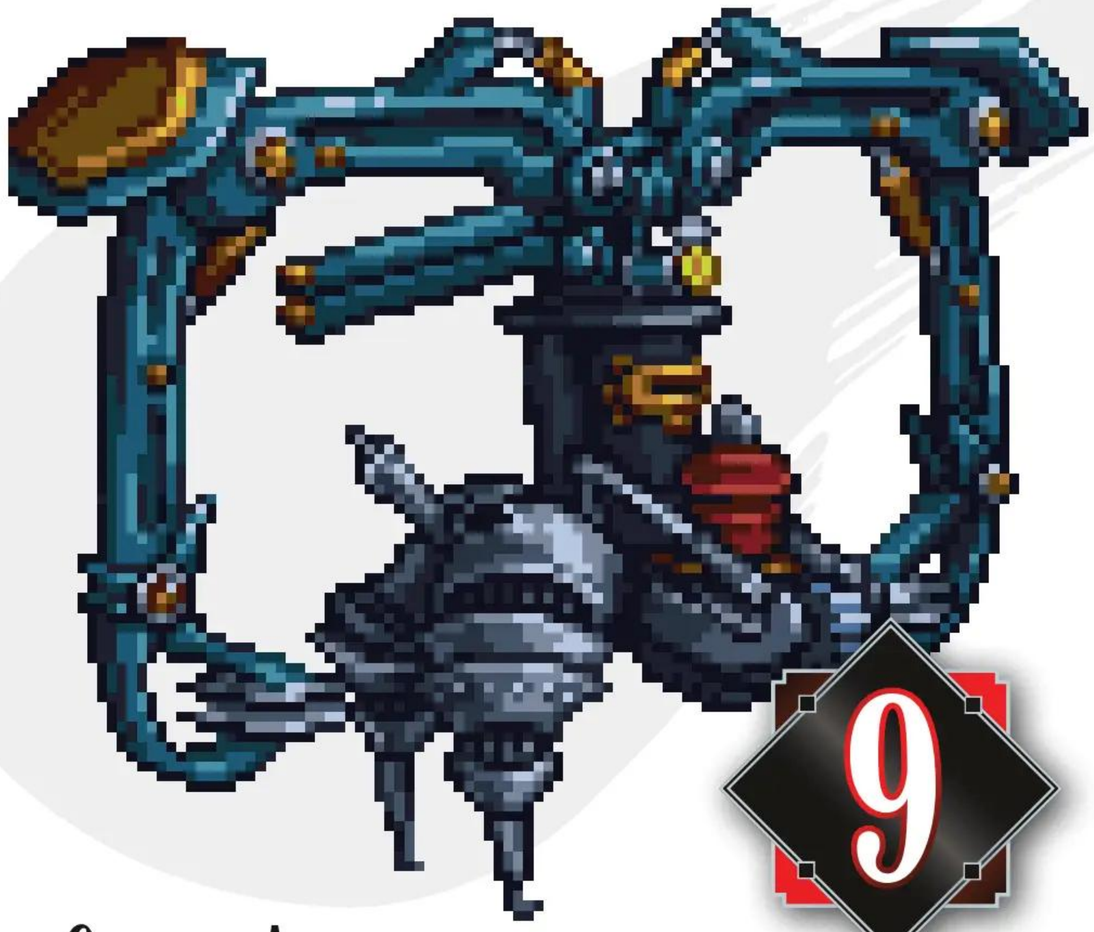
Its health does not replenish between battles so Celes, Edgar and the crew can whittle away at its HP each time, while healing themselves in between battles.

8

Bahamut *Final Fantasy IV*

The king of the dragons is fought as a boss as a sidequest after defeating Leviathan. Bahamut is located in a cave in the southwest of the Red Moon and is challenged after completing a dungeon full of fiends. Its iconic move, Megaflare, is cast after a countdown, giving your characters a window to prepare for the onslaught with defensive spells and items. If you survive, Bahamut is all yours as a super strong Eidolon for Rydia to summon in future battles.





Carry Armor *Final Fantasy VII*

After Cloud returns, the party continues to the Junon Underwater Reactor to collect more Huge Materia. Standing between them and the submarine they need to steal is a huge robot set on them by the Turk, Reno.

Carry Armor grabs and immobilises up to two of your party members so the race is on to disable its arms with high-level lightning magic. Once the arms are out of action, the main body is all that remains. Carry Armor can still smack you with a damaging laser attack so a balance between offence and defence must be struck to defeat this menace.

Phantom Train *Final Fantasy VI*

On their way back to Narshe, Sabin, Shadow and Cyan find themselves aboard a Phantom Train filled with ghosts. The trio must reach the front of the locomotive to stop their one-way ticket to the afterlife. Once you reach the engine, the train itself attacks you.

Strong physical attacks work well, as do recovery items on the undead train but you can always just have Sabin suplex it. The battle isn't too difficult if you know what you're doing and Shadow stays in your party. It is made the more iconic for the scene with Cyan straight afterwards.

Barthandelus *Final Fantasy XIII*

This tricky boss fight is one of the toughest and you can easily be taken down if you're not careful. Barthandelus is fought on three separate occasions and players need to have a good grasp of the game's paradigm system to get past the boss.

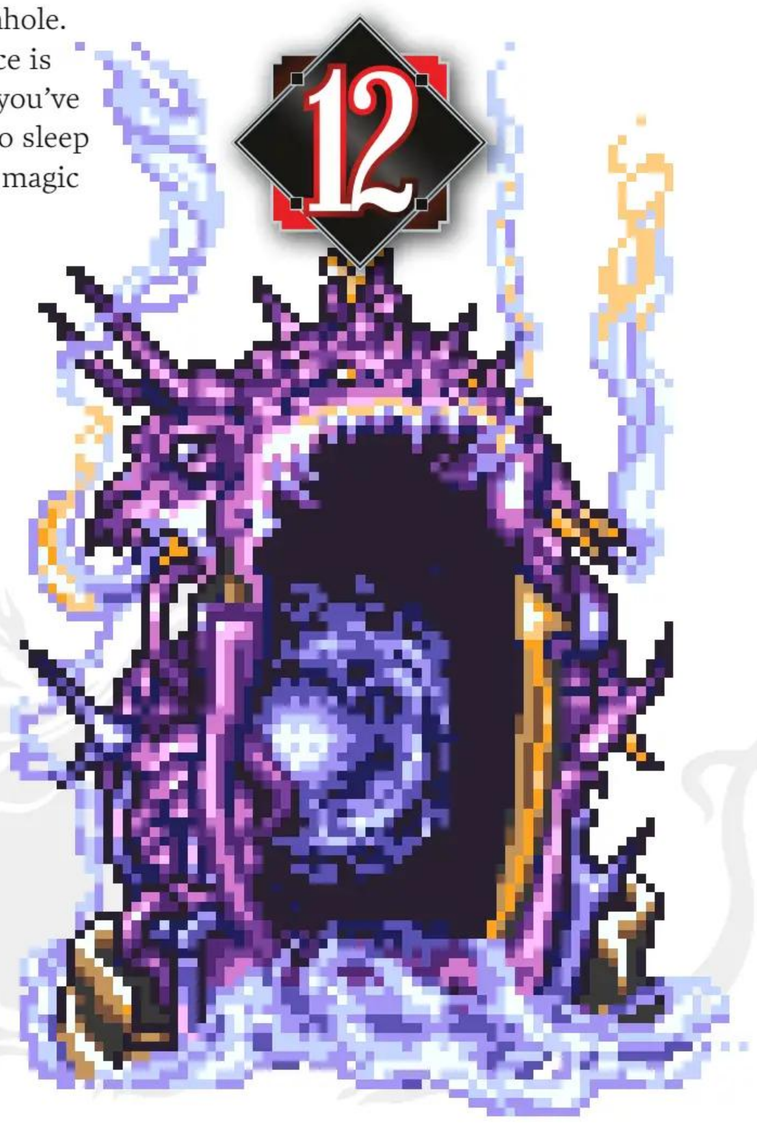
Buff your characters up as much as possible with the likes of haste and weaken Barthandelus with deprotect and deshell. In all three of the battles, Doom will be cast if the battle takes too long, making it a race against time too.

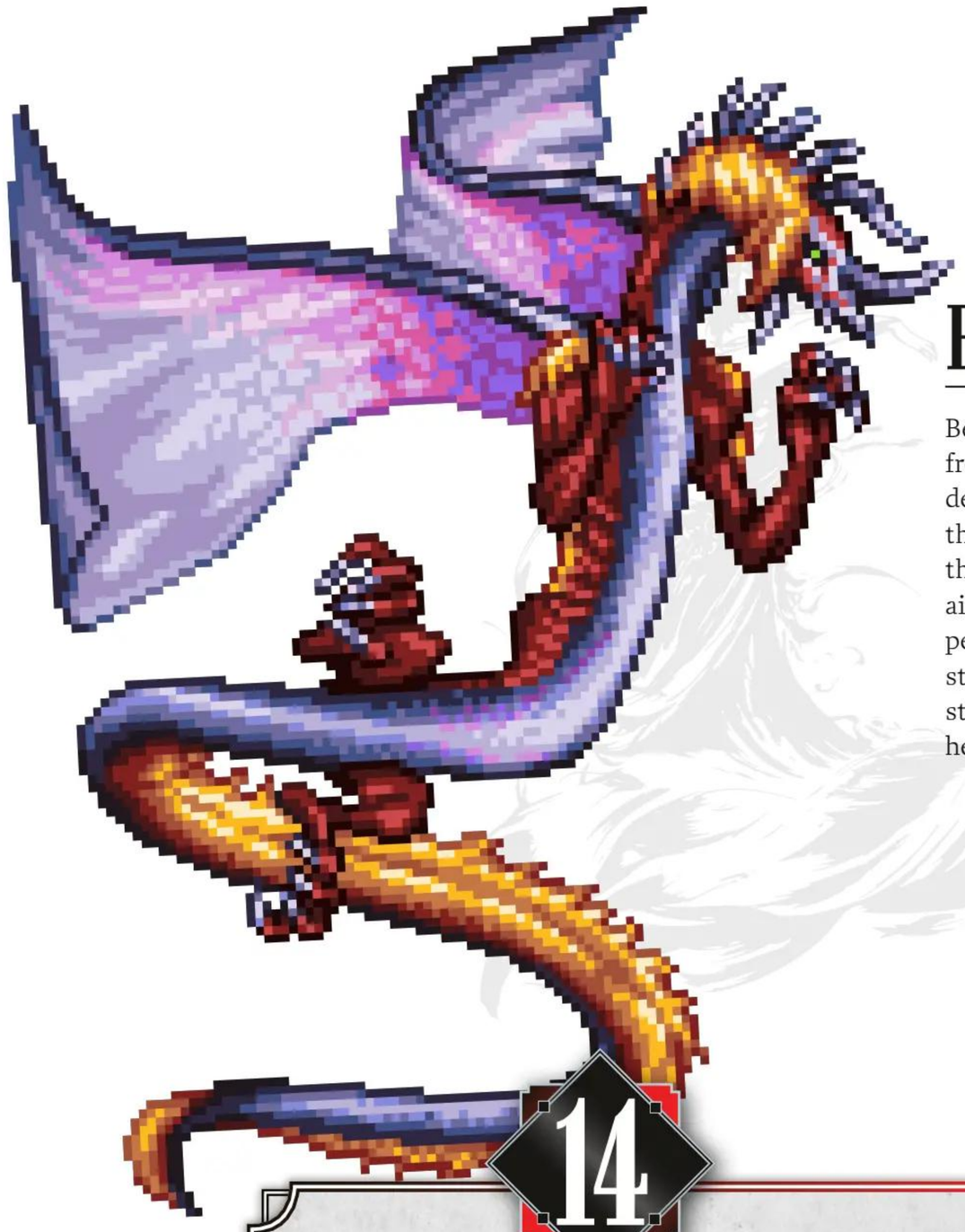
Atomos *Final Fantasy V*

Your reward for climbing to the top of the Barrier Tower is a tricky boss fight. Atomos guards the entrance to the dungeon, Castle Exdeath. The boss will unleash Comet continuously, barraging your party with the strong magical spell. Once one of your allies falls, Atomos will bring the fallen character towards it before sending them into a wormhole.

The best form of defence is attack. Throw everything you've got at it or send Atomos to sleep and then only attack with magic so you don't wake it.

"The best form of defence is attack. Throw everything you've got at it"





13

Evrae *Final Fantasy X*

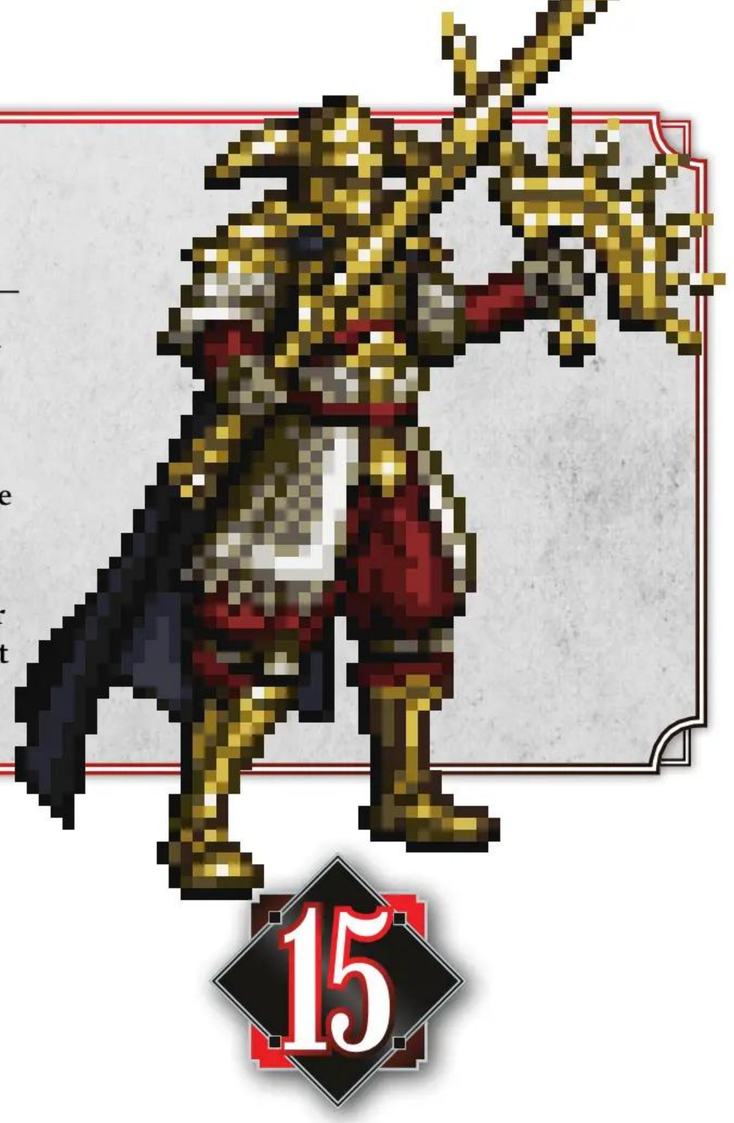
Bevelle's airborne guardian wyrm protects the city from intruders. Fighting the winged beast from the deck of the Fahrenheit airship, no Yuna or Aeons in this battle makes it trickier but the party can call on the pilot Cid to launch missiles at the boss. The airship can be moved towards or away from Evrae to perform different attacks and to undertake different strategies. Evrae can haste itself and turn you to stone so you may well spend a lot of the battle healing and reviving yourself instead of attacking.

"You may spend a lot of the battle healing and reviving yourself instead of attacking"

14

Judge Ghis *Final Fantasy XII*

After busting Ashe out of confinement aboard a Dreadnought, Vaan and his allies' escape is blocked by the formidable Judge Ghis. Slow yet powerful, the trio chosen to battle Ghis can weaken him with ranged and magic attacks while staying away from his sword attacks. Be warned though, Ghis can still cast Aero and strengthen his defences while you keep your distance. After he falls, the party escapes but this is not the last you'll see of Ghis.



15

Black Waltz 3 *Final Fantasy IX*

The final of a triple-header of bosses, this unstable boss is an expert magic caster. Black Waltz 3 will stop at nothing to return Princess Garnet back to Alexandria. Slaughtering a number of Black Mages, the pure emotion transforms Vivi into Trance. Use Vivi's Black Magic spells to send Black Waltz 3 over the cargo ship's deck and into oblivion. After the battle is ended, Zidane, Vivi, Steiner and Dagger speed on to the safety of Lindblum but the damaged Black Waltz 3 gives chase. A fireball from Vivi knocks it off course and it is seemingly defeated once and for all...

And some of the worst...

Not all bosses are tough or fun, some are weak and infuriating

Ultros

Ultros is fought four times in *Final Fantasy VI* but his jokes and taunts soon wear thin. Most of the time, a barrage of fire spells will send him packing.

Palmer

Palmer, one of Shinra's directors, stands in your way as you escape Rocket Town in *Final Fantasy VII*. Posing little to no threat, you can make light work of him.

Tantarian

Fought against the clock or with a weaker party than usual, *Final Fantasy IX*'s Tantarian hides in a book and is frustratingly tough. A foolproof strategy is required here.

Azulmagia

This blue magic fiend from *Final Fantasy V* will learn the magic you cast on him then fire it back on you. Unless you encourage him to use the Self-Destruct on himself…

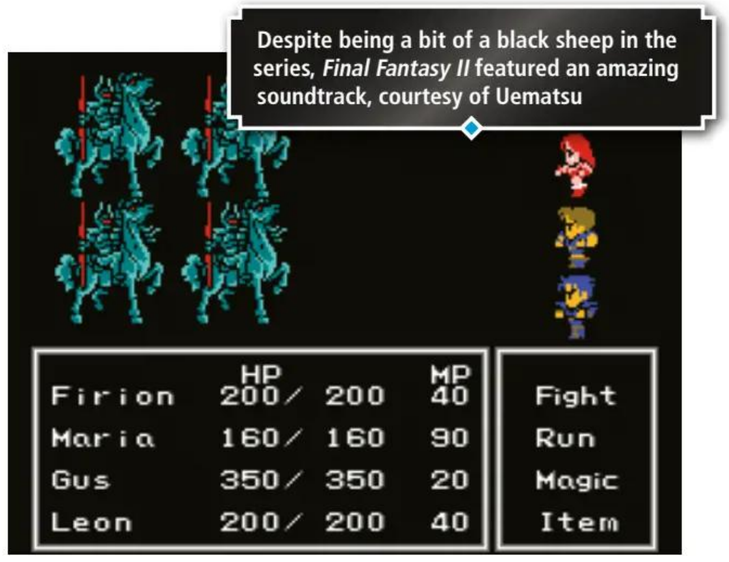
Diabolos

Rub the Magical Lamp given to you by Cid and you're in for a whole world of pain. This battle's a cinch if you have Carbuncle – just reflect this future GF's attacks.

NOBUO

UEMATSU
The Melody Maker

We sat down with gaming's most celebrated and successful composer to discuss over three decades of his career, from helping establish some of the biggest RPGs in the world to his flirtation with the mainstream and his colourful, progressive-rock-flavoured inspiration



Despite being a bit of a black sheep in the series, *Final Fantasy II* featured an amazing soundtrack, courtesy of Uematsu

Nobuo Uematsu didn't want to be a composer for videogames. You can tell from his varied influences that the world's most popular videogame composer grew up with other intentions. Uematsu educated himself with Elton John records, learning music by ear on his sister's piano and his grandparents' guitar, before developing a taste for British prog rock by the time he graduated Kanagawa University with a degree in English.

"My plan was to become a more conventional composer," Uematsu told us when we asked about how he ended up working with Square back in 1987 on a little game called *Final Fantasy*. "But the trouble was that I couldn't find work anywhere outside the gaming industry! That's how it goes, I guess."

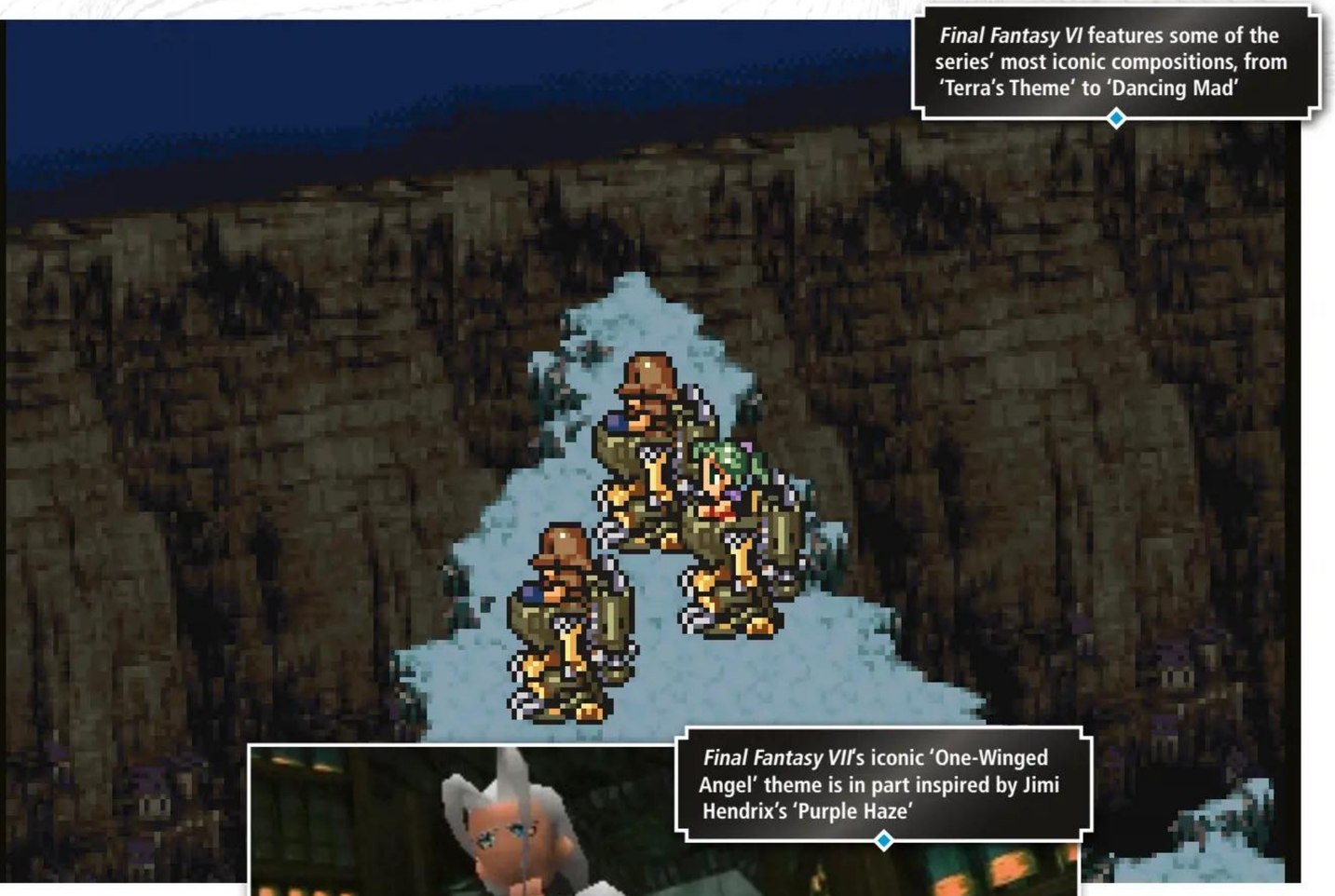
Uematsu dreamed of writing music for European films, creating scores that elicited emotion from the viewer, that galvanised that romantic lining that defined European cinema in the late '60s and early '70s. A chance meeting with Square developer Hironobu Sakaguchi in Tokyo led Uematsu to composition for games, simply because it was the path of least resistance into music composition of any kind.

Many years later, Uematsu is still working with Square, and on the *Final Fantasy* brand, too (albeit as a freelancer): indeed some of his recent work is from *Final Fantasy VII Rebirth* — for which he penned the main theme 'No Promises To Keep'. It's a legacy that's lasted almost 40 years, with humble MIDI beginnings on the very first *Final Fantasy* game Square developed back in 1987.

"I was extremely surprised [by *Final Fantasy*'s success]", Uematsu reveals. "Up until that point, Square hadn't really had any hits, so seeing the game do so well was something I hadn't expected at all!" It wasn't just Uematsu that was caught out by the game's success; the peculiar naming convention of the series came from Square's assumption that the RPG would be its last ever game, so the studio went all in on what it assumed would be their eponymous final fantasy. Before this, Uematsu had composed for games like *Genesis* and *Alpha*, neither of which enjoyed much success at home or abroad. Things looked grim for Square, and Uematsu kept his part-time job at a music rental shop in Tokyo, just in case things didn't work out.

As it happens, Square's gambit paid off. Sales were strong in Japan, and the series took off — its mix of intelligent world design, inventive characters and rousing music were repeatedly cited as reasons for the game's success. These are elements that would come to define the series as a whole, and Uematsu fit director Hironobu Sakaguchi's vision for the series perfectly — after all, the mix of pop and prog inspirations in Uematsu's formative years ran perfectly parallel with what Sakaguchi wanted *Final Fantasy* to be: at once familiar and ground-breaking.

"Fantasy-based RPGs are the easiest genre to compose music for, if you ask me," Uematsu told us as we asked him to pick out what made RPGs appeal to him the most. "If you look at more action-oriented genres like shooting games for example, the genre itself will often dictate what you can and cannot do. They require a score that's fast, intense and upbeat. RPGs, on the other hand, often contain scenes that work better with a more melodious score. But RPGs also allow me to write battle themes where I can change the rhythm



Final Fantasy VI features some of the series' most iconic compositions, from 'Terra's Theme' to 'Dancing Mad'

Final Fantasy VII's iconic 'One-Winged Angel' theme is in part inspired by Jimi Hendrix's 'Purple Haze'

☞ and the key freely, which is something I like to do quite a bit. Having that variety, the freedom to write these different types of music, is something I feel very comfortable with. It's the easiest way to work for me."

But *Final Fantasy* isn't just any old RPG series — there's a specific tone and mood to each game, from the hopeful message of the first title and its story of Warriors of Light holding back an ancient evil, to the doomed, pessimistic outlook of *Final Fantasy V* and its narrative dirge towards death. Each game in the series has a personality that — in no small part — is realised by its score.

"[Composing for] a *Final Fantasy* game, the process is mostly the same every time a new one comes along. Before I go to work, I need to understand the general mood of the game. So I'll usually start reading the script to find out more about the background of the game and what kind of characters it features. Grasping the overall mood is key, really."

Many mainline games and a myriad of spin-offs later, and Uematsu's arpeggio motifs and delicate melodies are still used by other composers in tribute to the series' legacy. Just one refrain from the theme of the original game is enough to elicit gooseflesh in players that know *Final Fantasy* as a series — as an experience — and that's a fact that isn't lost on Uematsu.

"It's a great honour [to hear my motifs used today]. It always makes me very happy. It's been quite a while now since I stopped working [on the *Final Fantasy* series], so I feel extremely honoured that these melodies are still being used."

Uematsu saw Square through arguably the most exciting period in RPG history: as the series' style evolved, so too did his own. *Final Fantasy* morphed from 16-bit to 32-bit, giving Uematsu even more space to play with the music, give even more characters their own themes, create even more sprawling and evocative OSTs. More of his rock-based musical education came to the fore in his battle tracks, more of his appreciation for European classical music showed itself in his character themes, and more of the love of progressive rock appeared in his work — melding melody and mathematics, emotion and musical theory.

The pinnacle of this evolution of both game and music was 2001's *Final Fantasy X* — the first game in the series to feature voice acting, stereo sound and move to a true 3D engine. Uematsu, by all accounts, was moved by the game's scenario and the result was a score that was a significant departure from anything else he'd done for the series. He composed his first solo piano track for the game, created a modal hymn rooted in Okinawan tropes (with huge narrative implications) and — due to constant late nights and tight deadlines — resorted to hiring composition assistants for the first time in the series' history.

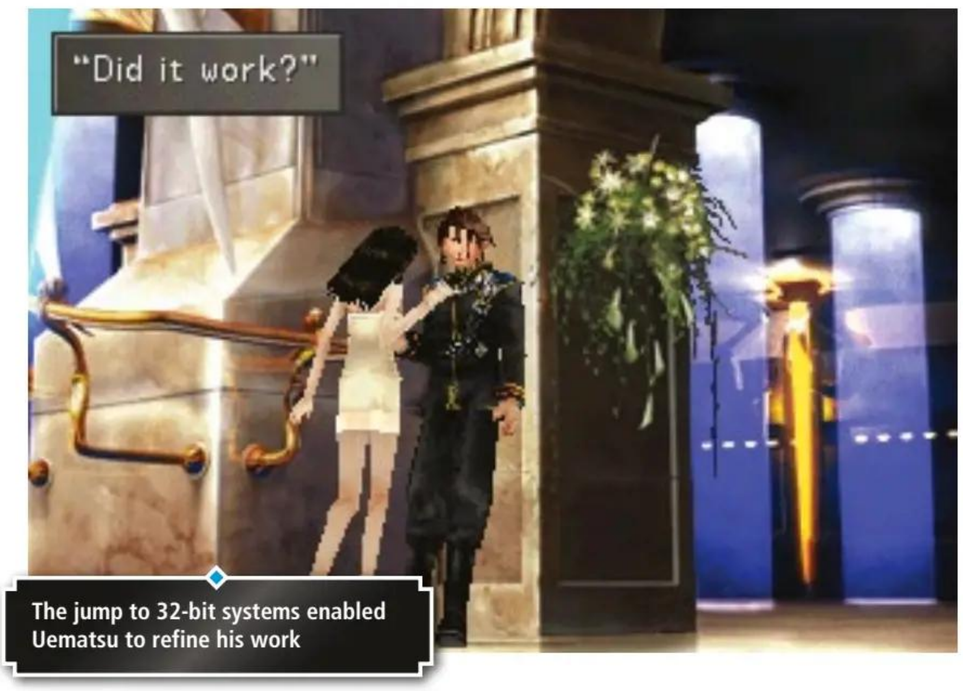
Ever a perfectionist, the result was at least something Uematsu could be proud of — in his own eyes, a lot of *Final Fantasy*'s music comes across as 'samey', a lot of the tracks don't resound with him. "It's up to each listener to find out whether my music is special to them and why. I always feel that my compositions are all too similar. There are a lot of pieces that I personally don't like very much."

This changed with *Final Fantasy X*, however. Despite the tight deadlines and the various changes in how Square had begun to manufacture and produce videogames, the resulting OST to the game is something that would forever mean a great deal to Uematsu, and there was one track in particular that has stuck with him to this day.

"'To Zanarkand' was one of those rare pieces that I felt came out just right. I think I did a good job on that one. The way it develops is something I'm rather proud of." It was around this time that live *Final Fantasy* concerts started to gain popularity in Japan, and in 2002 Uematsu attended the Tokyo Philharmonic Orchestra's sold-out show. This was the beginning of Uematsu's tenure as the 'face' of games music, and the composer found himself overwhelmed by the fan reception to his scores — especially as the Orchestra started playing his personal favourites, headlining sets with 'To Zanarkand'.

Uematsu ended up leaving Square in 2004 to pursue a career in freelance composition, but remained on good terms with old friend Hironobu Sakaguchi. Uematsu's work between 1998 and 2001 on non-game projects gave him a taste for the wider world of music, and as Square evolved and became a more commercial beast, Uematsu found himself moving further away from the publisher — on a physical level as well as an emotional one.

"There were many different reasons [for leaving Square]. A lot of people will think I'm joking when I say this, but one thing that



The jump to 32-bit systems enabled Uematsu to refine his work

Blue Dragon had its share of great music

influenced my decision to become a freelancer was that the company [Square] had recently relocated and it took me a lot longer to get to my workplace. I used to drive to work most days, but driving all the way to Shinjuku was a big stretch for me, really. I felt that there were better ways to spend the time I lost through my daily commute. But there was also another reason. I had been in the game industry for two decades, working on nothing but videogame soundtracks. If you look at life like a big learning process, I felt like I had graduated from this part of my life. I was ready to move on to the next school."

Uematsu still very much identified as a rock musician, despite making a name for himself in the pseudo-classical sphere of music in videogames, and having that music translated into live, orchestrated performances. Sensing this desire from their contemporary, fellow Square employees Kenichiro Fukui and Tsuyoshi Sekito offered Uematsu the chance to join their *Final Fantasy*-influenced live rock band, The Black Mages.

Initially, Uematsu was resistant, but after supporting the duo with keyboard parts at a live show in 2003, he caved and agreed to be a part of the band proper. Consisting of Uematsu himself, the two founding members, Keiji Kawamori, Arata Hanyuda and Michio Okamiya, The Black Mages became an official band, and Uematsu's musical diversity took on a whole new shape.

"My original idea was to be the band's producer and nothing else," he tells us. "I never planned to play any instruments myself. But then Mr Okamiya, the guitarist, said he was out if I didn't play with the band. It was such a crazy thing for him to say, but it made me feel guilty enough to give in to his request."

When asked where the idea for the band came from, Uematsu was keen to deflect back to the original two Square staffers that approached him. "The idea for the band originally came from

Fab 5

Essential listening from the musical maestro

Liberi Fatali

Final Fantasy VIII, 1999

The opening track to *Final Fantasy VIII* had vocal elements that mixed Latin phrases with a language of anagrams to create a brooding and Gothic track that sets the tone of *FFVIII* within its opening bars. 'Liberi Fatali' was even used by the USA's 2004 synchronised swimming team to support its routine.

One-Winged Angel

Final Fantasy VII, 1994

'One-Winged Angel' was the first *Final Fantasy* track to have lyrics (in Latin), and Uematsu has cited the theme to Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* as an inspiration for the piece. Uematsu wanted 'One-Winged Angel' to sound like a '60s or '70s rock track, performed by a full orchestra – a goal he certainly achieved.

Dancing Mad

Final Fantasy VI, 1994

This is the showstopper of *Final Fantasy VI* – a lengthy beast that moves from Baroque to Fugal, somehow mixes the musical motifs of a circus, a funeral and a prog-rock headline closer into one 14-minute piece. It's potentially the most ambitious, sprawling piece of games music ever written for a 16-bit system.

To Zanarkand

Final Fantasy X, 2001

While composer Nobuo Uematsu's *Final Fantasy* soundtracks are some of the most beloved in the genre, his experience hearing Miki Higashino's diverse and lush score for Suikoden inspired him to up his game for *Final Fantasy VIII*'s soundtrack. While this produced longer load times, the CD-quality audio is a standout.

Battle at the Big Bridge

Final Fantasy V, 1992

A song that has reappeared again and again in *Final Fantasy*, 'Battle at the Big Bridge' was originally written for the Gilgamesh boss fight in *Final Fantasy V*. Thanks to Gilgamesh's repeated appearances in the franchise, the song has been the subject of multiple remixes and re-orchestrations.

☞ Mr Fukui and Mr Sekito. [They] should get the credit. They thought it would be fun to do these rock arrangements of the battle themes from *Final Fantasy* and played some samples for me."

This wouldn't be the only live rock/game music band Uematsu would find himself in, though: in 2010 he founded Earthbound Dads and got straight to work on making his dream version of *Final Fantasy VI*'s 'Dancing Mad' a reality. Fast-forward a year and his classical-inspired arrangement has been performed myriad times within a progressive rock context, and Uematsu has again toured the world, bringing his Deep Purple, The Who and The Beatles-inspired performances to life.

Despite moving away from Square (now Square Enix) in 2004 and going freelance, Uematsu remained particularly close to his old friend and colleague Sakaguchi, who had left the company a year prior to Uematsu. "We [still] have a very good working relationship, I'd say," Uematsu explains. "By now, I can more or less tell what kind of mood he's currently in from the way he writes his mails. You know, what words he uses and all that [laughs]. I know straight away if he needs me to finish a piece really quickly, what direction he wants me to take on a tune or if he's not really happy with my work. We know each other well enough to understand what's written between the lines."

This relationship with Sakaguchi resulted in a pretty decent start to Uematsu's career as a freelancer — it was Sakaguchi who landed Uematsu his first big gig as an independent worker, offering him work on 2006's *Blue Dragon*. Initially, Uematsu had intended to wind down his work life a little upon becoming a freelancer — after setting up his own studio (Smile Please) with his wife Reiko, and establishing his own record label (Dog Ear Records) based on his dog and mascot Pao, Uematsu intended to spend more time in his mountain cabin, but actually found himself working longer hours than he ever did at Square. And he was still working primarily on game soundtracks, too.

"I personally don't have a strong preference or wish to write only videogame music. It's just that I have been working in the industry for decades now, so naturally, people tend to think of me as a videogame composer. That's why I get so many offers to write music for videogames. But I'm not saying that I'm unhappy about that... I do enjoy the freedom that comes with working on soundtracks for role-playing games," Uematsu explains. "Getting to write different types of music is a lot of fun."

Selected Timeline

Mystery Quest, *NES 1987*
Final Fantasy, *NES 1987*
Final Fantasy II, *Famicom 1988*
The Final Fantasy Legend, *Game Boy 1989*
Final Fantasy III, *Famicom 1990*
Final Fantasy IV, *SNES 1991*
Final Fantasy V, *Super Famicom 1992*
Final Fantasy VI, *SNES 1994*
Chrono Trigger, *SNES 1995*
Final Fantasy VII, *PlayStation 1997*
Final Fantasy VIII, *PlayStation 1999*
Final Fantasy IX, *PlayStation 2000*
Final Fantasy X, *PlayStation 2 2001*
Final Fantasy XI, *PC 2002*
Final Tactics Advance, *Game Boy Advance 2003*
Blue Dragon, *Xbox 360 2006*
Lost Odyssey, *Xbox 360 2007*
Super Smash Bros. Brawl, *Wii 2008*
Lord of Vermilion, *Arcade 2008*
Final Fantasy XIV, *Various 2010–2017*
Oceanhorn: Monster of Uncharted Seas, *PC 2013*
Terra Battle, *iOS 2014*
Fantasian, *various 2021*
Fantasy Life i, *various 2025*

We asked Uematsu what he likes to listen to in his own time, what he likes to consume away from videogames — after all, considering his legacy, it makes sense that his tastes range far and wide, and his output is the natural result of a hybrid, eclectic taste. "[I listen to] all kinds of music, really. I randomly listen to many different genres like rock, jazz, classic or world. The list goes on and on. There's no genre of music that I don't enjoy."

When it comes to how Uematsu views his own impact on music, though, the outlook is a lot more humble. "Well... maybe there [are] some young people out there who listened to my music and thought to themselves: 'I could do that. If something as unrefined as this is all it takes, I could do that guy's job, too.'"

It's another example of Uematsu's painfully humble attitude towards his own work — despite accolades from music bodies recognising his contribution to not just game music but music as a whole, Uematsu still seems to view himself as an imposter: a pretender to the throne he finds himself begrudgingly occupying.

"My music is really extremely simple. If someone who listens to nothing but Beethoven sets out to become a composer, he will have a very hard time trying to live up to his idol. But I'm sure there are plenty of people out there who think they can write melodies that are just as good as mine."

That isn't to say Uematsu doesn't hold videogame music in high esteem, though: Uematsu even goes as far as to not listen to other pieces of games music because he wants his own style to remain pure, for his own sound to settle in naturally without external influences from the same field interfering with how he works. That's why most of his motifs and melodies come to him whilst he's out walking his dog. But there is one piece of music that Uematsu admits that had a big impression on him when he first heard its iconic opening notes. "The *Super Mario Bros* theme. That's absolutely fantastic, a real masterpiece," he laughs. "Everybody loves it! I don't think there's a single person out there who hates that melody. But what makes the theme so appealing to me personally? That's difficult to say. It's actually a rather complicated melody, and yet you can just hum along to it quite naturally. I wonder why that is. I really don't know. Mario's character, the way the game plays, the music. Just about everything about

Uematsu helped compose the epic main theme for *Super Smash Bros. Brawl*

'To Zanarkand' (*Final Fantasy X*) is one of Uematsu's personal favourite tracks

Lost Odyssey saw Uematsu experiment with more styles, such as contemporary jazz and techno

In 2012, 'Aerith's Theme', from *Final Fantasy VII*, was voted into the number 16 position of Classic FM's annual Hall of Fame top 300 chart

Super Mario Bros comes together just beautifully. Koji Kondo is absolutely brilliant."

Uematsu has had a complicated relationship with game music throughout his career. On the one hand, it's been responsible for his worldwide success, his recognition in the Hall of Fame on Classic FM, his status as one of the most notable musicians in gaming. But on the other, it's an area he never intended to fall into, and his life has been shaped by it.

Uematsu doesn't like to think of himself held alongside the likes of Beethoven or John Williams, of being included in the myriad Halls of Fame he's been inducted into. "It does make me happy, don't get me wrong. But I'm worried that if I get too excited about these things, they might go straight to my head. That's why I try not to think about accolades too much!"

Uematsu's modesty shines through when we bring up luminaries of the classical music scene — despite having *Guardian* articles dedicated to outlining the comparisons in Uematsu's work and the classics, he still feels humbled to be mentioned in even the same paragraph as his predecessors. "I do feel that these comparisons are something of an insult to John Williams and Beethoven," he says. Maybe if Uematsu had ended up working in the romantic European movies he'd grown up admiring, he'd have felt different about his place in composition history. "After all is said and done, my music is just a series of notes that I come up with while I'm humming. They're not complex or intrinsically crafted compositions. I just make them up randomly."

But that isn't to say Uematsu disregards the impact of his aural soundscapes have on the projects they accompany. "Just try to play a game with the sound turned off and you'll see straight away [how important] music is to games", he explains. "It feels like you can't breathe. I think music plays a role in videogames that's similar to air or oxygen. When you play a game with the sound and music turned off, it feels like you can't breathe properly."

It's that understanding Uematsu has for the relationship between a videogame and its score that has led to millions of people around the world enjoying his compositions — even outside of the traditional gaming space. Uematsu has appeared five times in the annual Classic FM Hall of Fame, and even reached third place in the esteemed listings in 2013, with the organisation calling him 'part-John Williams, part-Wagnerian leitmotif, part new-age soundscaper — and a legend in his own right', high praise for someone that considers himself an outsider in his own field.

Without Uematsu, role-playing games wouldn't be where they are today. His ear for the cinematic, the grandiose, the progressive, the nuanced has left an impact on generations of players, and is now starting to proliferate outside the industry and draw more people into retro gaming for inspiration and artistry. There are very few people that have the right to shout about doing such a thing, but the ever-humble Uematsu wouldn't: he'd rather just carry on humming a new melody to himself whilst he's out walking his dog.

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THE STORY OF FINAL FANTASY

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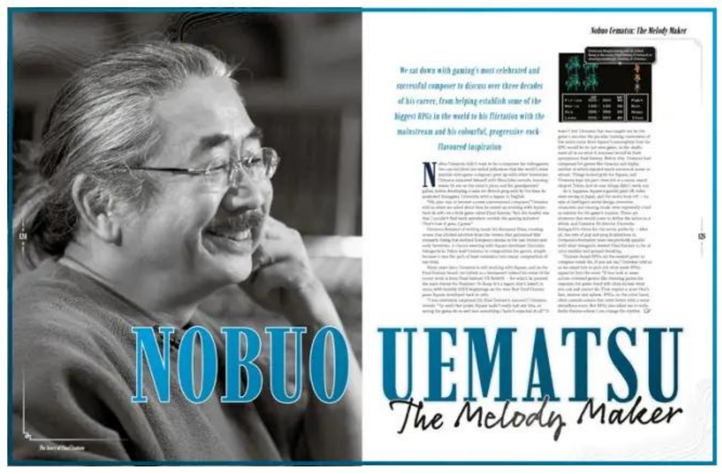

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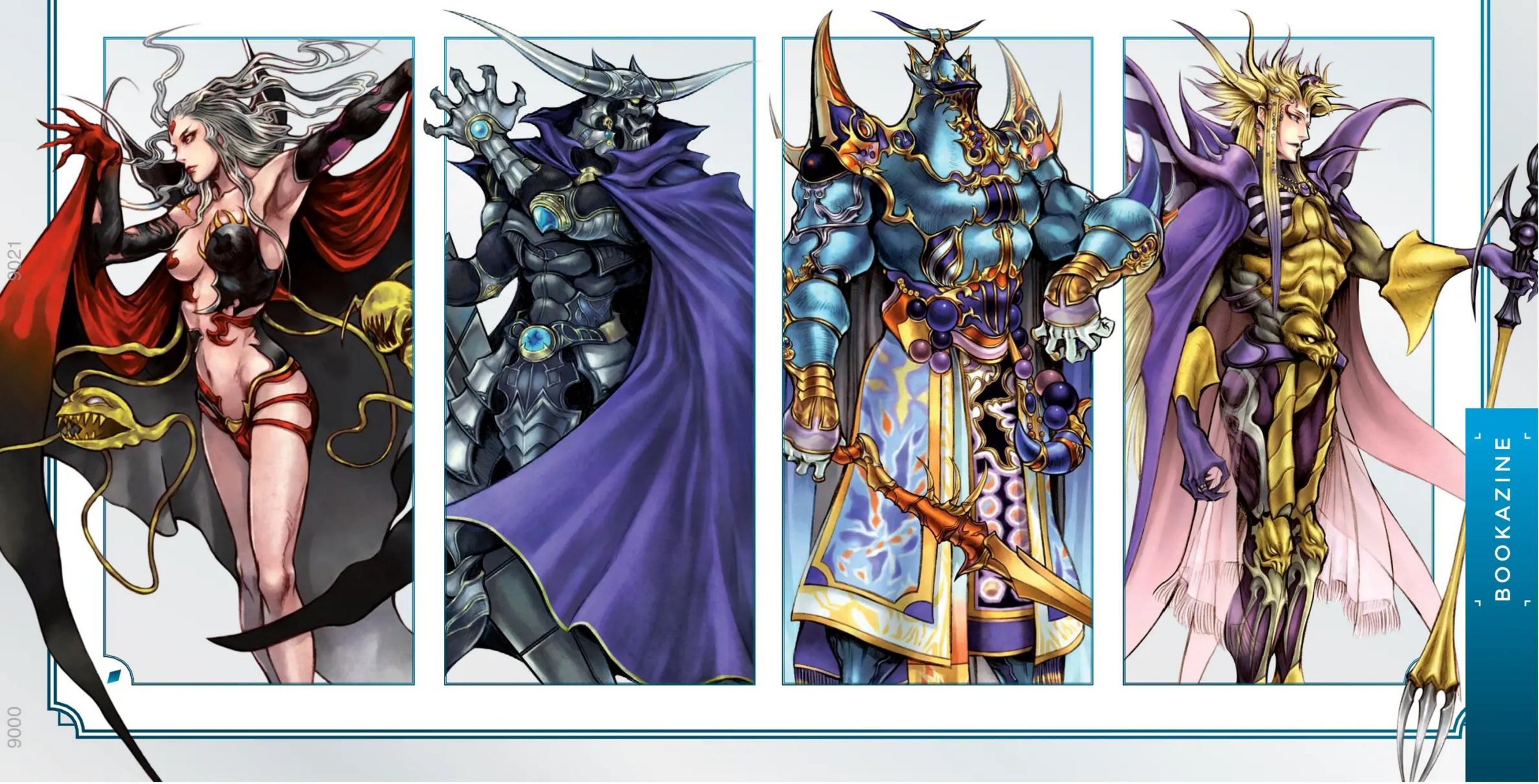

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